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DATE: 1984

THE WEARY STONE
THE BENWEE HEAD
TELL MY WIFE TO REMARRY

by

John Jeb Goins

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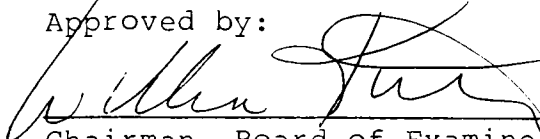
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Master of Fine Arts

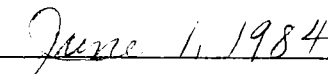
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THE WEARY STONE

When Doctor Ponce opened the door of his house and faced the dark man, his first inclination was to close it with the same deliberateness with which he had opened it. His inclination evaporated in the cold nudge of a wet, nickel-plated automatic against his nose.

The Doctor was not a young man, but in his prime as his friends were inclined to say, tall for a man of humble beginnings. He was tall for a man with such precise and careful hands that had made him the best open heart surgeon in Mexico City. He was a tall, proud man with gleaming black hair and a prominent arched nose that made his eyes seem too close together. But Doctor Ponce was not a fool. He did not move except to slowly turn in his hands the crystal snifter of fine Mexican brandy that Chula had poured

for him a minute before. A minute before when she had forced him down on the calfskin lounge and knelt over him, pressing her hugely pregnant belly against him. Close up, her face was the color of cream and as she carefully cleaned his face with her tongue her long blond hair coiled around his head.

"You are the Doctor?"

"Yes," the Doctor answered, sighting down the barrel of the pistol into the pupil-less eyes of the man.

The man shrugged and looked furtively over both his shoulders. Beyond the eaves, rain roared down through the night like it was the first of forty days and nights to come. Lightning slashed through the gray shroud of rain. The scene behind the dark man jumped out for an instant like someone had flicked a light switch on and off. After the light was gone the image still burned on the back of Doctor Ponce's eyes, etching out the flat mud drive in front of the house and the forested mountains of the Tres Marias beyond. He sensed there was something missing. There had been no horse, no burro standing ankle deep in the thick red mud of the drive. Many times before Indians had come to his door in the night and asked him to stop their woman's pain or their brothers, whom they had cut themselves, from bleeding to death. Many times he had noticed the heavy machetes or brown stock of a small caliber rifle sticking out from beneath their ponchos; and by the resigned look in their eyes he knew they weren't resigned at all, that they came to him

as the last resort and if he did not help they would kill him. But all those times they had never put the weapon to his face and now, because there was no horse or burro, he realized that the man had come by foot. Looking down in the dim light filtering through the open door, he saw that the man's shoes were not covered with mud. The Indian's mudless black leather shoes gleamed darkly like they had been spit-shined. Doctor Ponce tightened his supple fingers around the snifter. He wished for more lightning but it did not come. He wanted to be sure that there were no footprints in the mud that surrounded the porch, no water filling up the tracks of this man who held a .45 on him. He needed to see one more time the slick red drive covered with a sheet of water evenly pockmarked and dancing beneath the rain.

Cautiously the Indian bumped his pistol against the Doctor's nose and with more urgency:

"You are the Doctor Ponce, yes?"

"Yes," the Doctor answered again. He sniffed the end of the gun. It smelled of gun oil and something like the musty odor of an armpit.

"Then Doctor," said the Indian, unbuttoning his full-length, heavy wool coat with his free hand. Thunder boomed from the darkness and a sudden gust of wind swept freezing rain across the porch. He raised his voice, "then Doctor, you know why I have come," and with a snarling grin he showed his strong, even teeth. The wind rushed on through the stand of pine trees on the slope behind the house and another

jagged line of lightning struck the mountains. Doctor Ponce saw no footprints in the mud. He had no idea why this Indian with a flat, cruel face and ivory teeth had come.

A weak-kneed desperation swept through him and it reminded him of a time long ago when his family lived in National City between San Diego and the Mexican border. He remembered the two room, stucco home and the sullen, California sea breeze that billowed in the muslin curtains, bringing its oil stench of Navy Shipyard and diseased, garbage-eating seagulls.

His father had worked for a living. He sprayed, picked and sprayed avocados. He picked and thinned strawberries in fertile inland valleys and he ate the strawberries that had frown huge and mushy in the sun. He cut, planted, sprayed and dug up enough flowers from the farms around Carlsbad-by-the-Sea and Encinitas to furnish all the marriages and funerals in L.A. for a year. That is what he would say the few times he was ever home.

Ponce remembered his father stomping into the house with mud caked on his pants and shoes. Where is my wife, he would shout, Where is my son? And then he would chase them both around the little house until he cornered them. As Ponce smothered his face in the folds of his mother's skirt, his father would lean against her and say, Watch this son . . . watch this. He remembered his mother hiking her skirt over her head, saying, Leave now . . . go play outside. In the humid air of the hallway, he would listen to his par-

ents through the wall, waiting for his father to say, Yes Gabriela, I have cut more flowers than I can count but you are the best. Then his mother spoke husky and low. For some reason Doctor Ponce remembered now what she had said each time to his father. Have you seen his eyes? she would ask, and his father always answered, No.

"I'm getting wet," the Indian interrupted. "I have unbuttoned my coat." He held open the left side of his coat and showed Doctor Ponce his bare chest. It was the thick barrel shape of a Highland Indian. Lightning flashed again and he could see glistening rivulets of water frozen to the stone of the Indian's face, the beaded water on the brown, hairless skin of his chest like drops of glass forever at the moment of collapse.

Doctor Ponce could not move. The Indian lowered the .45 and pressed it against the Doctor's chest. Still the Doctor did not move except to rock back slightly on his heels from the pressure of the pistol. So the Indian pushed him roughly into the house with the muzzle and then down the red-tiled hallway that led to the living room with its twelve foot, open beamed ceiling. The far wall was made up of four foot squares of glass, ceiling to floor. Each glass mirrored the men and room with the dark brooding quality of puddles of water on asphalt. The Doctor retreated, back-pedaling, to the middle of the room and stopped. The pistol dug into his ribs and the two of them stood like dogs just before they fight, stiff legged and still as stone, each

waiting for the other to turn and run. Chula was in the kitchen opening and closing cupboards.

"Who is it?" she asked in her high thin voice. It was the voice of a young girl, supplicating and naive, all the things that Chula wasn't even though she looked and sounded it. He hoped she would recognize the strained tone of his voice and get the pistol he kept by their bed.

"I don't know," he answered and looked hard at the other. He did not care who this Indian was. His confusion had left him when the pistol rammed against his chest. Now he wanted to crash the snifter into the other's face. But he did not. The Indian nervously worked his flat black eyes back and forth as though he were looking over the room. Doctor Ponce realized that the Indian didn't want to look at *him*. He glared at the man, daring him to stop his eyes, to look square into his own.

"Don't use your eyes on me," the Indian hissed through clenched teeth and raised his free arm, his flat callused palm curving forward like the flaring hood of a cobra. He struck Doctor Ponce once across the face. It made the Doctor's eyes water and the blood flushed hot on his cheek where he had been hit. He blinked slowly, dazed, as the room came back into focus. Behind the Indian he saw Chula grow out of the dark doorway leading to the kitchen. He didn't hear her scream but only saw the red circle of her lips as she covered them with the pale, splayed fingers of her hand, digging into her cheeks. The Indian did not turn

to look at her.

"She is your wife," he said.

"Yes," Doctor Ponce answered as though it were a question. He could already feel the stiffness at the corner of his mouth as his lips began to swell. He tasted his blood but he did not reach up to feel.

"Tell her to sit down on the couch. Tell her not to scream again or I will kill you both."

"Sit down Chula," he said and she was already sitting. "Be quiet," he said to the silent confusion of her wide, blue eyes. He looked back down at the Indian who had begun moving his lips. No sound came from his mouth. Doctor Ponce noticed then what he had not noticed before. At the root of the Indian's nose was a white, star-shaped scar. It was a sacrificial bleeding scar, something that he had never seen in Mexico, something that he had first learned about from his grandfather. It was a ritual practiced four centuries earlier by the Indians of Peru, before and after the time of the Incas.

The Indian cracked him across the face again and began to speak in a low, even whisper, the sound of the words gaining strength in the back of his throat. He spoke in a different language. He spoke Quechua and Doctor Ponce recognized the sound of it as the man raised his voice and began to chant:

"Ima su tiki? Ima su tiki? Saicusa, Saicusa."

"Saicusa," the Doctor repeated with the Indian whose

voice stopped as the word died in the Doctor's mouth. The breathing of the two men was lost in the dull sound of rain against the windows. Doctor Ponce leaned over to set down his snifter on the table but the Indian pushed at him with the .45. The squat glass turned over on the table as it slipped from his hand. It left a trail of rich, auburn colored brandy soaking into the white linen tablecloth as it rolled in an arc toward the edge.

"What does it mean?" the Doctor asked as he watched the glass belly up to the edge.

"Weary Stone," the Indian said, "Saicusa means Weary Stone."

The snifter eased off the table and in that moment it came to Doctor Ponce why this man had come. In all the years that he had spent studying medicine at Guadalajara and the perfecting of his surgical skill in Mexico City, a skill that his colleagues had come to believe was more god-given than technique, in all that time he had let himself forget. He had let himself forget because he had no reason to remember. But now, as the glass fell and the Indian began to chant again, he remembered. He remembered his grandfather.

It had been one of those hot, dry days in National City when it seemed like the ocean was a hundred miles away instead of one. He was playing in the front room with his grandfather's magnifying glass that the old man used to read

with when he wasn't sleeping on the couch. Ponce had not discovered yet that the marvelous instrument could start fires without matches, that it could start fires with the sun. That day he was still amazed with the way that it made little things seem big and he crawled around on the rug examining minute pieces of mud that had come from his father's boots. His father had stomped in the night before and now his parents were locked in their bedroom cutting flowers.

Ponce spent the better part of an hour on the rug until he became aware of the whistling sound of the old man's breathing. His grandfather was asleep again on the couch. Ponce took the opportunity to sneak up and crouch over the old man's head. He moved the glass slowly across the pitted and channeled skin until he discovered the delicate gray lashes of the old man's eyes. As he concentrated on the huge yellow folds of the lid, it slowly slid back and swimming in the middle of the glass appeared a great, dark brown eye congested with sleep. The two of them remained in that position, eye to unblinking eye, until his grandfather opened his mouth, sucked in a long quavering breath of air, and began to shriek, Gabriela, Gabriela! Ponce jumped back as the old man fumbled at him, trying to hold him. They fell scrambling to the floor as his mother appeared in the door. She tried to pull them apart but the old man was strong and he pinned Ponce to the rug, holding him with all the weight that was left in his wizened body.

"Look Gabriela," the old man shouted over his deafness. "Look," he said pointing to Ponce's eyes.

He fought like a cat, writhing and kicking with his legs, but his grandfather held him while his mother pried the glass from his hand. She looked for a long time into his eyes, making a soft humming sound. Ponce stopped struggling when he saw his father appear in the doorway, wearing only a pair of shorts.

"What's this?" his father asked.

"It's Ponce's eyes," his mother answered, "Like I have told you. They are flecked with the gold."

"So!" his father said. "What does that mean?"

"You know what that means."

"And you believe . . . "

"I believe it," the old man said and stood up to face his father. Ponce lay staring up at the three people looming over him. He was aware of the rise and fall of his chest as he panted, thinking, my eyes are flecked with gold.

"I have heard it from my father," his grandfather said shaking a fist. "And my father learned it from his father, and my grandfather from his father . . . we have waited a long time for this to happen."

His father gently pushed the old man's fist away from his chin. "Waited for what?" and he turned to Gabriela. "Waited for this?" He pointed down at Ponce.

"Yes," she said.

"Yes," the old man said too. "He is the one. He bears

the gold flecks of the Inca, Huaina Capac. He is the one who can bear the weight of the Weary Stone."

"So!" his father said again but with more emphasis, with more disgust. "You believe these stories you have been told. You think there can be a time like there was before the Spaniards came. Why do you think I left Peru old man? Hey . . . why? Do you *really* think there are families descended from the Inca, that someday they will come to power, that they will rule the Sierra again. I bet you think the Indians were never conquered, that they have been waiting for a man with flecks of gold in his eyes."

No breeze billowed the curtains now and the room was hot. As the three stood silently over him, Ponce watched his grandfather slowly look down at him. For an instant the angry old man smiled and then looked up at Ponce's mother.

In a single breath, Ponce's mother and grandfather answered, "Yes."

His father threw his arms up and left the room. He was back in a minute fully dressed and clapping a battered felt hat on his head he stomped out the front door. "I have work to do. I have cabbages to pick," he called over his shoulder as the screen door slammed shut behind him. "Take care of my son the Inca."

That night after dinner his grandfather told him the

story of the Weary Stone. The three of them sat around the kitchen table as Ponce finished his third bowl of potato soup. When he was through, the old man began to speak, slow and ancient. His voice brought into the small room the remote feeling of standing on top of a tall mountain. He told Ponce of a stone larger than the house they lived in that was settling into the plain before the ruined Incan fortress of Cuzco in the highlands of Peru. It was the largest and most magnificent stone that was to be used in the walls of the fortress.

The master mason Calla Cunchuy was said to have found it in a dream and the next day he walked to the very spot where only a small point of the stone showed above the ground. I must have that stone, he had said and more than twenty thousand Indians struggled with their hands and cables the size of a man's leg to unearth the stone. Rollers and wheels were useless on the steep mountain slopes, and what's more, they thought of the wheel as a child's toy and that somehow it demeaned the strength of many men. And so it was that they rolled the monstrous rock end-over-end the fifteen leagues to the yet unfinished fortress. Half of the men pulled from the front with ropes while the rest steadied it from the rear with more ropes. It took them two long months to reach Cuzco and then they rested for a week before they raised it up the last slope.

But they should not have rested.

It only let the heavy work of the months before stiffen

their arms and legs. Halfway up the bearers in the front were careless and pulled unevenly, throwing the ones behind off balance. The huge stone broke loose and rolled back down over the army of men behind. It killed more than three thousand before it came to rest with terrific suddenness on the level ground below.

After that Calla Cunchuy could not get any men to help move the stone. They told him that the stone had grown weary and that now it had wept blood and they pointed to the streaks of red running down the sides of the stone. It was the blood of their brothers and fathers. But they did not admit that. They claimed that it was the blood of the stone and that it had been too tired to make it up the final hill. They said it deserved to rest on the plain below.

Ponce's grandfather had paused then and drew in a long breath. His eyes glowed and sweat stood out on his face. He wet the corners of his mouth with his tongue:

"They said it deserved to rest on the plain below. They called it the Weary Stone," and he slapped his hand down hard and bitter on the kitchen table. "Two years later the bastard Atahualpa killed his brother Huascar and when the Spaniards came the stone still lay sinking into the ground, still too tired to be moved." The angry old man slapped his hand down again. "Four hundred years our people have waited for the stone to be moved. My father told me as I am telling you Ponce. He told me that the wise men of the Inca said that only one man could ever move the stone that

had killed three thousand, that lay untouched through the fall of the Sun. That man would be descended from Huaina Capac, the last true Inca before Atahualpa. In that man's eyes would appear the burnished gold reflections of our Lord, the only one who warms the cold winds of night, whose presence in the sky touches all men."

"Papa," his mother interrupted, "Papa, he is only ten. He will not understand." His grandfather did not speak for a moment. The wind was picking up outside and the limbs of the bottle-brush scratched across the screen of the kitchen window. If they had not known it was the wind, they might have thought someone was shaking the dry branches of the bush against the screen. His grandfather did not know better.

"What's that?" he said, twisting in his chair to face the window.

"That's the wind, grandfather," Ponce said and his grandfather sat back down. The color had left his face and it had the appearance of crumpled up parchment.

"I don't have much time, Gabriela. That is why I must tell him now."

"Yes," she said, "I understand."

"Ponce," his grandfather said, wiping the sweat from his face.

"Yes?"

"You are the one who can move the stone. You are the one that we have waited for."

"Because of my eyes?" he asked.

"Because of your eyes," and his grandfather paused again. "There is one thing you must know," he said and cut his eyes toward the window as the branch tore across the screen. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "There are some who will want to stop you. There are some who do not want you to disturb the grave of the Weary Stone."

"Who are *they*?" he asked, looking at his mother whose eyes were wide white against the brown of her face.

"They are the ones whose ancient brothers and fathers were crushed beneath the stone. They are the cult of the Weary Stone. They want it to remain forever sinking into the ground, forever marking off the weariness, the impotence of our blood." His grandfather leaned over and pinched the skin between his eyebrows. "You can recognize them by a star shaped scar at the root of their nose. They cut themselves there and at night they take the blood and pour it over the stone."

"Let go!" He grabbed at his grandfather's hand, but the old man did not loosen his grip.

"They will come for you one day, Ponce. These people will try to kill you. Do not forget."

But Ponce did forget because his grandfather died a month later, falling asleep one last time on the couch. After that his father never let his mother mention the story of the stone to him again and for some reason she never tried even when he was away.

For a while, as he brushed his teeth before going to bed each night, he would look up into the mirror and see the dark brown irises of his eyes and remembering his grandfather he would lean forward and peer first at one eye and then at the other. They were plain eyes as far as he could tell. Yet, sometimes the light would be just right and then he would see the faint sparkle of a ring of golden flecks around the pupil of each eye.

As the crystal snifter smashed to the floor, its shining pieces skittering across the tiles like cracked ice, he knew why this Indian had come. A fiery pain coursed up the back of his neck and into his head. The liquid fire poured into his eyes as he stood with his chest braced against the muzzle of the .45 and he felt no fear.

"You are the son, the brother of deadmen," he said.

He watched the Indian's skin fold and wrinkle up, becoming the haggard, gaunt face of an old man. It was the face of four hundred years of suffering, all the cold weary years of plowing fields with oxen, cultivating the four quarters of the land to fill the coffers of a foreign god instead of the bellies of his children.

"I will move the stone," he said, "Now is the time."

The Indian stood shaking before him, the heavy coat hanging over the broken shoulders of his people's sublimation like it would if it were hung up on a nail. He still held the .45 against Doctor Ponce but his arm weakened and

the muzzle slid down until it rested on the Doctor's belt buckle. The Indian worked his throat, trying to swallow. Finally he said, "No."

Yellow fire burned through the flecked gold of Doctor Ponce's eyes and the light filled the room. The light flooded out and filled the room like it was water, not leaving a single gray slant of shadow, not a single dark crevice.

"No," the Indian said again and staggered back, gripping the pistol with both hands. He stumbled and fell to his knees but he didn't drop the pistol. The blaze of light from Doctor Ponce's eyes was so strong that he squinted like he would squint into the face of a rising sun.

Doctor Ponce did not move. He did not even breath. He stood gazing down at the kneeling Indian and he thought, I am what my grandfather said. He turned and looked at Chula who was kneeling, her hands held to her face.

When he looked back at the Indian, he turned in time to see the shimmering silver of the pistol jump and the room went black.

Chula crawled through the darkness towards the sound of her husband's labored breathing. Her fingers touched what she thought must be the spilled brandy but it was the cold puddle of water from the wet Indian who was no longer there. She crawled through it and found Ponce stretched out full-length on the floor. Blood from the wound in the right side of his chest was already running sticky and warm

in the channels between the tiles around him.

"I am . . . I am not," he said to her and, as he tried to prop himself up, she stopped him. She pressed her hands against the bloody front of his shirt but she did not realize that there was a deep ragged hole in his back where his shoulder blade had been. He did not know that either.

"I must go," he said and tried to prop himself up again. She easily held him down. The pulse beneath her palms pumped slower and as she leaned over and pressed with all her strength her tears fell onto his face.

He felt the cold drops of rain from the blackness. They did not surprise him as he looked up into what he knew must be the clouded night sky of the mountains above Cuzco. Below him, in the bowl of a hidden valley, were the winking lights of a multitude of campfires. The campfires of his people. He felt good. Tomorrow he would lead them from the mountains to the plain below and he would lift from the bosom of the earth the huge Weary Stone of their surrender.

"Why Ponce . . . Why!" Chula gasped over him as she felt his pulse grow impossibly weak. He opened his eyes and looked up at her. The flecked gold no longer shone from around his pupils. He raised his left hand and stroked it across her swollen belly.

"Take care of my son," he said.

He was not to know that Chula carried his daughter and not his son; and inside her womb the baby girl's eyes were already the incredible clear blue of a shallow, sandbottomed sea.

THE BENWEE HEAD

Just when Stalls had begun to think that the rest of his life stretched before him as straight and as unnervingly obvious as a chalk-line carpenters snap, "everything," as he might say later to his grandchildren, "everything came undone."

At thirty he had decided that being a mechanic specializing in early Volkswagon rebuilds wasn't that bad. Among other quirks of his personal fate, over which he falsely felt no control, he had sidestepped draft evasion and Vietnam by taking a loosely structured curriculum of logic and environmental geography courses at the local community college. By doing so he inadvertently, which is exactly the way he thought of it, met and married a woman that until a hot sweaty afternoon in a Southern Californian August stood by him. He had the unfortunate surprise of discovering her

apparent dissembling on a beach towel in their backyard beneath the blistering noon sun.

"I forgot my lunch," he told them. This is a nightmare, he thought. He went back inside the house and poured himself a tall ice-cold glass of water from the refrigerator. Then he stood at the sink and stared out the kitchen window at a desert beneath a sepia-toned blanket of smog. Of all things, he wondered why, when given the opportunity, he voted for Richard Nixon. He could not recall the reason. That is the sort of man he had become.

One frigid spring night eight months later Stalls boarded a small Irish freighter bound for Glasgow, Scotland. A watchman had stopped him on the dock and asked his business. He said he was a passenger on the Benwee and the man nodded shrewdly, as if this had great portent. Their breath formed white plumes in the dim light of the shed. The lonely man put at his ease was quick to become friendly; and with a knowing smile observed that he was a Yank.

He nodded in answer.

"Now you Yank's just can't take the cold, eh?" the man reasoned and not wanting to be misunderstood, "not because yer weak or nothing like that," and he waved his arms in pure human delight, "no, not that, it's because ya don't dress properly for the cold."

He could smell the bite of brandy in the air. The watchman had proof of what he said and he unbuttoned his

coat and the sweater beneath that.

"Here, feel here," and the watchman offered his unbuttoned chest.

He smiled and shook his head as the man began to unbutton two more layers of undergarments. "I believe you," he said hoping to stop the man, who had already fingered his way through a tangle of buttons and flaps to the light skivvy covering his chest.

"Feel, feel," the watchman urged, and taking his hesitant hand the watchman held it to his chest. "Ya see?"

He nodded. "I see," he said and it was true the watchman's chest radiated heat and felt damp with sweat from all the layers of clothing.

The watchman prodded his chest with a stubby finger and guessed that he wasn't properly dressed. It caused the man to shake his head sorrowfully, these Yank's would never learn.

"Yes," he agreed, "we'll never learn," but he wasn't sure who this *we* was. But he had learned that layered clothing might be the key to this watchman's night. In the icy shadow of the gangplank he turned, one hand on the rope railing, and looked back. The figure of the watchman waved to him from the half-light of the shed, a happy man.

"'ave a good voyage," the watchman called and he thought the man squeezed one eye shut in an exaggerated upstage wink. "Watch your step aboard the Benwee, eh?"

Stalls found the Chief Steward asleep in the Officer's Salon, his face hidden beneath a dog-eared copy of a novel by Leon Uris, *Topaz*. The Steward's name was Whitly. After a perfunctory check of Stalls' ticket he welcomed him aboard. The cabin they had for him was on the same deck as the dining room and he shared a common bath with the other passengers. But there was only one other passenger the Steward said, an elderly Scottish gentleman, so he didn't expect crowding to be much of a problem.

He apologized for boarding so late.

"Not to worry," Mr. Whitly said with a wry smile. He explained that the ship would have sailed without him since to the Captain the Benwee was a cargo ship first. Usually they carried frozen beef lungs used as dog food filler and assorted hard goods.

"By the way," Mr. Whitly asked, "is this your first time aboard a motor-ship?"

"Yes," Stalls answered.

"Well the times you'll need to remember are 7:30 to 9:00, noon to 1:30, tea-time, and 5:30 to 7:00." He cocked his head in anticipation of a question. "You'll hear the dinner gong," he added.

He didn't ask Mr. Whitly what time tea-time was. Mr. Whitly shrugged and turned to leave but paused at the door, "Oh, by the way, if the Captain offers you a sea-sucker tell him you like the dark chocolate will you? We're frightfully low on caramel you see, and that's the Captain's

favorite. I'd appreciate it," and with another shrug and sad-sack eyebrows he disappeared.

The cabin was quite small. On one bulkhead hung the bunk with drawers built in beneath and a narrow closet beside it. On the other side stood a little mahogany desk screwed to the wall with a matching chair. In the corner by the door stood a wash basin with a cold and hot water tap. A bath and face towel with the words Benwee Head stenciled in faded black letters hung neatly folded on a bar.

Stalls put the clothes he had in his one suitcase away in the closet and drawers. Two pairs of peg-leg levi's, two pairs of socks, three boxer shorts, two t-shirts, one white dress shirt, one tie. He wore his only pair of slacks, one of the many shades of charcoal, a blue Arrow dress shirt without tie, a brown corduroy sports coat and a heavy woolen jacket over that. For shoes he had the one pair of black leather Wellingtons on his feet.

After a moment's consideration he reopened the drawers and left them half-drawn. The insides smelled strongly of fresh oil-base paint. Then he stripped to his boxers and stooped over the wash basin positioned for someone under six feet. He ran the tap marked with "H". After a few seconds the water sputtered and turned suddenly scalding and filled the room with steam. He didn't bother to mix the hot with cold in the basin and chose to juggle a washrag beneath the hot stream. Before using it he had to unfurl it

and hold it by two hot little corners. It hung before him like a small steaming white flag of surrender. The steam fogged the mirror before him. He couldn't tell if he was smiling so he put the hot rag to his face. It eased the tension around his eyes. He breathed in the hot moist air through the washrag until it began to cool. Once again he looked at the clouded mirror so he wiped off the condensation with the washrag.

A man with blunt features stared back, a thick short nose that had been broken and flattened even more so long ago in high school water-polo, thick lips that were neither sensitive nor sensual, just lips, black eyebrows over tired brown eyes. Understandable he guessed since he hadn't slept well for eight months. She had once told him that sometimes he had an expression of total indifference that frightened people. At the time he had shrugged, now he afforded himself the opportunity to see what she meant; and to know perhaps that more than just all those other people she had meant herself. He allowed himself to remember her for the first time in a week. She would always be there he knew. How far away and like a dream it seemed, that small one bedroom house in a small hot, dusty town called Norco in Southern California surrounded by the vague green of thousands of eucalyptus trees.

He stands in the middle of the living room staring at the worn oak flooring. The dirt is beginning to grind into

the wood. He tries to remember what he has forgotten and feels panicked because the house is empty and the front door left open. The windows are open too and a soft breeze makes the curtains breath in and out. All he can think of is all the time that has passed . . . *awhooosh*, and that he has forgotten something again, forgotten that they had argued or maybe that he had finally hit her. But he can't remember because time . . . *awhooosh!* has sent it all fluttering away somewhere. It seems as though it has happened before, standing there in the empty house, sure that she has left him because he couldn't remember something he had said or done. The dry dead sound of the house fills him. He looks up and sees the two black triangles of the cat's ears sticking up behind the edge of his bed on top of the refrigerator. His two yellow eyes at once both alarmed and accusing. In one black racing *awhooosh* he is gone and the cat door bangs. Hello, he says and no one answers. She has left and he can't remember why. His hands burn from grease and solvent. I am a mechanic, he thinks, but for how long he cannot recall. *Bang!* and with the clattering of its door the cat stands before him slowly weighting and unweighting his front paws on the oak floor, his tail straight up and staring at him with those accusing yellow eyes. The cat shifts his eyes and stares past him through his legs. He turns to face the screen door; and *awhooosh*, *Bang!*, the cat door brings it all clammering back.

The two of them stand on the porch. He looks angry,

his arms around two grocery sacks. She looks sad and older.

He tries to say something, that he is sorry he is standing in his house, or your house now. Nothing comes out and all he manages is a dry swallow that cramps his throat. Tears fill her eyes and he can tell that this is not the first time he has forgotten. He says then, with the house breathing around him, that he had better go, and, Yes, the other says, you better go. They open the screen and he sidles past them onto the porch, down the steps, across the stretch of dry bermuda. He sits for a moment in the car. Everything is hot. The keys are still in the ignition and to his everlasting consternation he tries to restart an engine that is already running.

The answer is for him to leave so he drives back to work and tells Leonard, his boss, that he is leaving town. Leonard says that he understands.

"Stalls," Leonard says as he collects his tools, "you're a good mechanic but right now you need to get out of this town."

He knows that Leonard means to start over.

"Christ! you can be a mechanic anywhere," Leonard adds.

But he is through with tools, and grease and parts that never fit just right because of others that do. He stops picking up his tools and offers them to Leonard, but he says he wouldn't take them even if Stalls paid *him*. He tells Leonard to give them to the high school kid that has been working in the afternoons. Leonard is at a loss. Before

the yawning overhead door to the shop they shake hands.

For eight months he waits tables at a steak and seafood restaurant called the Cask and Cleaver. He wears flamboyant Hawaiian shirts and bermuda shorts, the waiter uniform. One night a happy couple eat steak and lobster and drink a karafe of house burgundy. They leave him a thirty dollar tip. He turns in his Hawaiian shirt and shorts at the end of his shift. At the end of the week he sells his car and leaves the odd pieces of furniture in the apartment for the landlord.

He rinsed the razor out in the basin and set it on the edge to dry. The water drained out and left a ring of stubble. He couldn't remember shaving but he did remember calling her to tell her he was going away to sail the seven seas. Unlike him she didn't take it as a joke. With a strained voice she wished him well. He could tell that he was there, that perhaps he stood right beside her.

The single yellow light in the cabin made the white metal walls look the color of egg custard. He switched it off and lay down on the bunk. Everything smelled clean and warm. A whisper of air came from the heating duct overhead. He fell asleep wishing things had somehow been different for them from the very beginning.

Mr. Whitly didn't spend much time worrying about his new passenger. Although he did often wonder why anyone ever

booked passage on a freighter he had never bothered to question anyone. Entirely their business he reasoned. His duty, as he saw it, was to insure that they had no call to ever write a letter to the Company Office in Belfast complaining about their voyage. Lately it had been no small task aboard the Benwee. The Captain was getting worse, he knew, but this latest required reading by all the officers of *Topaz* had filled him with a sense of fearful anticipation, that the Captain would drag him to the brink of a communal doom.

A week before the Captain had solemnly asked him, including the First Mate, Mr. Kerr, and the Chief Engineer, Mr. Frisby, to stop by his cabin after dinner. Whitly had answered that Yes, of course they would, sir and Captain Trillick fixed him with a long unblinking gaze, the fine linen napkin tightly rolled in its silver ring held to his nose as though he were smelling it. Finally the Captain nodded. Whitly felt more in that silent gaze than he wished to imagine. Ever since their discussion about women, as he liked to think of it though he was sure the Captain thought otherwise, he felt that Captain Trillick believed he was mocking him. Whitly felt like leaping to his feet and shouting that nothing could be further from the truth, but a familiar fear twisted his stomach. For five years he had been working on a sixteen foot sale boat below decks and he knew at the Captain's whim it would disappear. Whitly had known from the beginning it was against company policy to store it aboard but once he had begun the project and cut the first

pieces of wood, it had consumed him. He had never asked the Captain and the Captain never mentioned it, although the entire ship's crew to the cabin boy knew of its existence. Almost complete now, the Miss Melody, named after one of the cheap westerns in the ship's library, *Wildcat Meets Miss Melody*, had yet to touch her sparkling blue hull to water. It would wait until he retired in another two runs. He cursed himself for ever being drawn into talking about women with the Captain.

Neither Mr. Kerr, who seldom was asked to the Captain's cabin, or Mr. Frisby had said they would come but they were already in the Captain's cabin when Whitly got there. He nodded to them. The Chief's face looked flushed and Whitly knew that he had started in on the gin after dinner. Mr Kerr sat in one of the armchairs beneath a colorful print of Gauguin's "*Ia Orana Maria*". His somber expression belied any emotion.

At ease behind his massive mahogany desk, sat the Captain.

"Glad you could make it," he said to Whitly and gestured at a green overstuffed armchair in the corner. "Can I get you a drink," the Captain asked without moving from his chair.

"No, thank you," he said and saw the flicker of reproach in Trillick's eyes. Whitly cleared his throat, "Well, maybe just a small one."

Trillick motioned with his good hand toward the counter where a bottle of Beef Eaters gin and White Horse Scotch sat

next to a beaker of water. Whitly fixed himself a weak whisky and water.

The room felt stuffy and smelled of perfumed hair oil, the Captain's hair oil. Mr. Kerr took out his American cigarettes and lit one without offering one to anyone else. Light from the only lamp in the room illuminated the desk, turning the dark mahogany the color of honey. The rest of them sat in degrees of shadow. Whitly raised his eyes to the print and concentrated on the two golden halos he could barely discern above the native mother and son.

A tapping sound, like rainwater dripping from an eave, brought Whitly's attention back to the desk. The Captain methodically tapped the cover of a paperback book sitting in the pool of light. Whitly did not think it had been there before.

"This, gentlemen," tap . . . tap, "is why I have asked you here."

The Chief sat beside Whitly. He was a stocky man, a solid block of flesh with close cropped silver hair with a nose and cheeks that shone red from the heat of the gin. If his small blue eyes had not looked so confused he would have been a jolly little man. From the corner of his eye Whitly watched him raise the tumbler full of straight gin to his lips and he thought that he could see it tremble. Whitly did not raise his own glass.

"Mr. Kerr, do you know what this is?" Trillick asked.

"Aye, Captain," Kerr answered. The muscle along his

jaw tensed, but he said no more.

"No, Mr. Kerr, I don't think you do." And the Captain stood and began to limp back and forth behind his desk.

Whitly felt his legs go numb with dread. He felt paralyzed. This could be the time that it all blows up, he thought. Though Mr. Kerr had never said as much, everyone believed him to be the only Southern Irishman aboard the Benwee, the only free Irishman on a ship of Ulstermen. For the year since Kerr had come aboard Captain Trillick had never let him forget it, never avoided an opportunity to needle him. It was beyond Whitly's imagination how Mr. Kerr had ever been signed to the Benwee, though it was appropriate he guessed that death preceded Kerr's arrival. Their old First Mate, Curlman, had drowned after he fell off the dock in Glasgow one night. Even though he was a big man nobody had heard the splash or cries for help. While taking his morning tea on the fantail, the cabin boy Percy had seen him snagged on one of the pilings, face down. He had been a bully of a First Mate, large and demanding, and no one shuddered at the thought of how long he must have hung on before he gave up.

The Captain still paced, shaking his head. Mr. Kerr took a measured drag on his Camel. No one spoke. Captain Trillick supported his wizened left arm at the elbow with his right hand. His left hand was bunched and curled in on itself like some exotic plant bud. Whitly guessed that the arm was hurting again. He made a mental note to order some

more "medical supplies". The sight of the Captain's arm intimidated him and always, for a reason he could never understand, made him feel guilty that his wasn't the same. He ventured to take a drink of his whisky but his hand shook too much so he lowered his arm, hoping that none of them had seen.

The Captain stopped. "This, gentlemen, is a book," and he laid his good hand on its cover. Because of the reflection from the lamp Whitly could not read the title, but he certainly could tell it was a book.

"Aye," Mr. Kerr said again.

Mr. Frisby nodded his head in agreement.

The Captain glared at Whitly. "What, oh? . . . yes sir. A novel sir?"

"No, Mr. Whitly, not just a novel, but a book," the Captain said with tightened lips, as he always did when he thought a point-of-distinction important. "That is a point-of-distinction we can cover at another time." He cleared his throat. "For the moment, gentlemen, my only wish is that you read this book," and he raised the book so that they could clearly see its cover. A crimson military cap with gold brocade rested on a pair of fleckless white gloves slightly covering the bold black letters T-O-P-A-Z surrounded by a broken black border. Below it said, "A new Novel by the Author of *Exodus*," Leon Uris.

All three of them stared at it in stunned silence.

"*Topaz*," the Captain intoned, as though it were a

password.

Still none of them spoke. Whitly could feel his heart pounding against his ribs.

"It behooves me to say no more about its inner design. I want you to read it without influence, but," and the Captain peered at them from above the lamp with open delight, "within the pages of this book lies the answer."

Mr. Kerr offered him a Camel as they stood in the passageway outside the Captain's cabin. Mr. Frisby had gone down a bit unsteadily to his engines. Captain Trillick had chosen Whitly to read *Topaz* first and allowed him a week to finish it. God giving Moses a due date, Whitly had thought. Ample time, the Captain told him, then he was to pass it along to the others and so on until all the officers of the ship had read it.

"Would ya carrre for a game of darts," Kerr asked him, rolling his r's.

They got a couple of cups of tea and milk from the galley before they went to the Salon to toss darts. Not once during the three games they played did they mention the book. And six days later Whitly was still reading it.

Whitly figured that he still had one day to finish the book and that it should be enough even though he had barely started it. He lay back in the arm chair in the Officer's Salon after showing Stalls his cabin and tried to read it

again. The words blurred together and he sensed impending failure. He closed his eyes for a moment and placed the book over his face to cut the glare.

A noise came from the gangplank and he knew that it must be late. The noise was the men coming back on board. They would probably sail at dawn after all, he thought. The book smelled old and musty. He left it sitting on the armchair and went to his cabin feeling very tired. Without bothering to wash his face he undressed and went to bed. In quiet despair he gave up and fell, cartwheeling to sleep. He dreamed again what he had dreamed off and on for the last year.

A beautiful woman that he had once seen years ago at his brother's wedding lay on his work bench. She wore a skintight black evening gown. She held no interest for him. He only felt a terrible urgency to get to his tools beneath her. He needed to work. Her skin glowed pink, full of life, and her nipples, erect and full as her lips, pushed against the sheer black material. She would turn her head and fix him with her black agate eyes and beckon him. "You don't understand," he would tell her, but she would close her eyes and wait. His heart would seize up with pity but for whom he never knew. He heard the sound of a crowd approaching, voices and feet tramping down the passageway. A dull thudding began as they pounded on the metal hatch and rattled at the battens. Suddenly he found himself on top of her, his mouth on her's and her tongue searching for

his. Her breath was hot and filled him as she began to flex and move beneath him. Her legs wrapped around him, the dress hiking easily up around her waist, and she snugged her heels into the small of his back. She wore no shoes. My clothes, he would think, where are my clothes? When the hatch swung open they all looked in as he lay panting and naked on the workbench, alone. They glared at him.

"Is this some sort of joke, Whitly?" the Captain asked.

They all laughed and he thought it was because he was naked. He couldn't move, galvanized with panic. They milled around him hooting and shouting. Someone produced a tape measure and yelling in triumph they proved to him beyond a shadow of a doubt that his boat would never fit through the narrow hatchway in the bulkhead.

"Nooo!" he cried and started up in his bunk, the sweat soaking into the sheets. "Damn," he said out loud and swung his legs over the edge and sat up. He held his head in his hands for a moment before getting a towel and cleaning the mess from the sheets.

Slowly he dressed and after lighting a cigarette went back to the Officer's Salon to read *Topaz*.

Stalls awoke slowly from deep sleep, floating up to the surface like a man underwater. The ship moved gently. A pencil on the desk rolled back and forth near the edge. He couldn't tell what time it was but he knew that he had slept late. A thin wash of light filled the room from the

curtained porthole. He drew back the curtain and bracing with the roll unscrewed the battens and opened the porthole. Cold air rushed in and felt very good. His skin bumped up from the chill. The sea, slick and gray, slid by. Long bodied swells undulated its surface. In the distance, masked by a gray shroud of mist and fog, he could see a dark line of headland. He guessed they must still be in the Bay of Fundy, sailing with the early morning tide. He closed the porthole but left the curtain back. His wristwatch was in his pants pocket. He didn't like sleeping with it gouging his wrist. It read 11:00. He wondered if there was a penalty for missing the first breakfast. He reminded himself that he was on vacation, a long vacation.

A muffled voice came from the cabin next door, gruff and deep, as though someone were arguing. He realized after a bit that it was a song. It didn't sound like any song he had ever heard before. Even though the man's voice was low and rasping the curious tempo made it sound happy.

Someone knocked at his door. He opened it to the Chief Steward, Mr. Whitly.

"Excuse me," Whitly said, embarrassed, "I, ah, didn't mean to disturb you."

"Not at all," Stalls said and realized that all he had on were his boxer shorts. "Just getting dressed," he added and motioned behind him awkwardly.

"We didn't see you at breakfast so I thought I'd make sure everything was all right."

Stalls noticed the dark circles and peaked look to Whitly's face. He wondered if Whitly got seasick and he guessed that Whitly might think the same of him.

"Everthing's just fine," he said, "Sorry about breakfast. I guess I was tired from the bus ride."

"Well, of course. I can understand that! No need to be sorry. We just like to make sure that you get settled in comfortably. Lunch is served from noon to one-thirty. Let me know if there is anything you need." Whitly turned to go.

Stalls stopped him. "Is the other passenger next to me?" He was curious about the singer.

"Oh, yes. That's Mr. McMahon, the elderly Scottish gentleman I mentioned last night. He boarded a day ago."

As though on cue, the door of the cabin next door opened and out stepped an old frazzled white-haired man with a tartan scarf wound twice around his neck so that it almost covered his mouth.

He mumbled a greeting to them, nodded his head and gestured at the hatchway opening onto the deck. They nodded back and he waddled out, his movements seemingly stiffened as much by the thick wool pants and coat he wore as by age.

"He likes to sing," Stalls said.

Whitly cocked his head at him. "Oh?" he said. "See you at lunch then," and headed back down the passageway. As though he made a habit of aborted leave-taking he paused and came back. "By the way," he said, "a Miss Carson boarded

this morning a half hour before we sailed."

"Oh," he said.

"A travel agent, I believe," and again Whitly turned to go. "Ah, her cabin is on the opposite side of the ship, the starboard side."

"The right side, I believe," he said and smiled.

"Yes, quite right Mr. Corbin," Mr. Whitly said.

"Miss Carson?"

"Yes, that's it," Whitly raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement of the pleasant exchange of information. "See you at lunch, then," and he left with the air of a busy man with things on his mind.

Stalls dressed and went out on deck. The wind blew cold in his face. Mr. McMahon stood at the rail. Stalls joined him and introduced himself. Mr. McMahon nodded in agreement. In a rambling guttural voice, the old man began to explain something to him and after great length spread his arms to include the world.

Stalls looked up, the wind causing his eyes to water and saw for the first time the huge red hand painted on the flat black funnel that loomed over them. When he turned back to Mr. McMahon he was gone. He shrugged his shoulders and looked forward. Some deckhands were making fast a loose tarpaulin over the hinged steel hatch cover of the number two hold. The tarpaulin snapped and tore repeatedly from their hands. Two large, yellow tractors bracketed the forward hold. They were lashed to the deck by a network of

cables and chain. As the bow rose and rolled over the swells the tractors did not move, as though they were glued to the steel plates. He wondered if they would let him stand out on the bow. He would ask the Steward, Mr. Whitly.

The cold had begun to creep through his wool coat and he shivered. High, gray sky lidded the world like cast iron. The sun hid behind the funnel, though no special brightness belied its existence. A world of diffused light. Open sea stretched out to the absolute, where gray met gray at the horizon. The unfamiliar world filled him with an uneasy feeling of profound and reverent dread of the unexpected. In it he sensed a beginning but he could not forget that this was a trip he had wanted for both of them, that they had even talked about years ago after reading *Grey Seas Under* by Farley Mowatt. Now he was taking the trip alone and in that sense it became an end.

Someone yelled on the bridge above him. The men on the foredeck stopped and looked up. They went back to work and someone yelled again. He couldn't tell exactly what was said and so, he guessed, didn't the men working on the tarpaulin. A young man with blond, almost white hair and eyebrows slid down the stairway handrails in one quick swoop without touching a tread with his feet. He stopped for a moment to nod at him and then turning, descended to the main deck in the same quick fashion. Stalls watched him walk swiftly to the group of men and say something to the sailor in charge of the gang. As they spoke, the other seamen

stopped their work and soon were gathered in a sullen looking group, their shoulders tucked in from the wind and heads down with serious expressions of disagreement. The large seaman in charge, easily half-a-foot taller than the officer from the bridge, gestured and pointed at the bridge and back down to the hatch cover. Then he pointed at the corner of the tarp, moving restlessly on its loosened tethers. It leapt suddenly into the air and snapped down on the hatch with a loud report that Stalls could hear. The men jumped back and then in a tight group clambered on top of it and wrestled with it. The wind seemed to be picking up and in the distance Stalls saw flecks of white on the surface of the ocean. Even the large sailor in charge wrestled with the tarp now, and in a frenzy of arms and legs they made the tarp fast to its corner. The officer turned lightly, having watched the performance without moving, and started aft to the superstructure. The sailors chocked the tarp down with wedges of wood and secured it with cables. When they finished they stood close for a bit and talked. The large sailor, his eyes dark from anger, glared toward the bridge.

Stalls turned as the young officer came swiftly up the stairway to the passenger's deck. He paused and shrugged his shoulders by way of acknowledging him.

"Looks like were in for a bit of a blow."

Stalls nodded in agreement and didn't know what to say. The man nodded back and climbed quickly up the next stairway to the bridge.

As Stalls stepped into the passageway out of the wind he heard the mellow hum of a small gong announcing lunch. Beneath his feet, and more noticeable now, he felt the steady vibrations of the powerful diesel thudding away below decks. He put from his mind the desire to see them working.

Willowbee, the radioman, or "Sparks" to everyone when at sea, could still smell the lingering sweet odor of the Captain's hair oil in the tight quartered compartment. It reminded him a little of his girl Sherry's perfume. Her picture was taped to the wall beside his desk. The cascade of stawberry blond hair around her face almost seemed to glow. He was glad that she had disobeyed her mother and taken the job as a salesgirl in Belfast. Now they could get married without worrying about having enough money. They could afford a nice little flat with garden space. He wasn't so happy about the increased bombings and shootings.

The Captain had been in to find out the latest on the bombings and Willowbee had told him that so far he had heard nothing. The Old Man didn't seem interested in the latest weather report. Of course he had been careful not to overstate the situation but it looked like they might be in for some wind and big seas in the next 48 hours.

It irritated Willowbee that the Captain was after him all the time for reports on the latest killings. He had withheld some of the news. Hearing it on the radio was bad enough but repeating it to the Captain who then repeated it

at dinner made him want to pitch the set over the side. The electronic gear had ceased being his friend and companion at sea. He no longer touched its dials with a compassionate touch and tuned it in now with a sullen vengeance. Waiting, he waited for the name of Sherry's sweet shop to explode across the airwaves. Two days before the IRA had bombed a Protestant clothing store and tavern. The Protestants had not killed any Catholics in four days. Bless us, Willowbee thought, bless the fucking Protestants.

The set's static broke up and he listened intently to the BBC's call sign for London's noon newscast. He leaned forward on his desk, pencil in hand as the distant English voice began to read the copy. He felt the movement of the ship change as she met the longer swells from the open sea.

Stalls paused in the doorway of the dining room and looked in, unsure as to where he should sit. There were three small round tables on one side of the room. Several men sat at one. Mr. McMahon sat by himself at another, an old dog-eared paperback, its back broken and loose brown pages askew, lay beside his plate.

In the center was a large rectangular table at which six men sat. One of the waiters, an old, gray gentle looking man in baggy black slacks with black satin pinstripes on the side and a starched white linen jacket, motioned for him to sit at the large table. He nodded and started casually into the room, but he lost his carefully managed balance from

a sudden, unexpected movement of the ship and he rushed across the room instead. He came up hard against the soft belly of the waiter, who opened his arms to receive him, and rebounded miraculously into an empty chair. He sat for a moment, stiff with embarrassment. His face felt hot. None of the men made any comment. It was as though everyone walked that way. The waiter patted him on the shoulder and handed him a menu.

"You muust be Mistairr Corrbinn," said the man next to him, his voice full and resonant. For some reason the Irish rolled "r" comforted Stalls. "I'm Mistairr Kayrr, the Furrst Mate," the man said and smiled. The white of his teeth gleamed against the blackness of his thick hair and rudy complexion of his wind-blown face. He held his right hand out to Stalls. They shook. Stalls overcame the shock of his abrupt and startling entrance as the First Mate introduced him to the other men sitting around the table.

"Mistairr Frisby--Chief Engineerr, Mistairr Whitly whom you've already met I believe--Chief Steward, Mistairr Bowerr--Second Engineerr, the Second Mate--Mistairr Garrdner, and ourr Capt'n--Capt'n Trrillick." Mr. Kerr nodded solemnly toward the Captain who sat at the head of the table. Behind him the portholes, secured in the white steel face of the superstructure, swam nauseatingly, vertical pendulums, between the sea and the gray-cast sky. Stalls tried to remember all the names. He knew Mr. Whitly and Mr. Kerr and the Captain, Trillick. The Captain nodded at him. He looked

like a slightly built man to Stalls and a lock of reddish blond hair continually fell over his left eye. The Captain would brush it back with an irritated movement of his hand.

"Welcome aboard the Benwee, Mr. Corbin." He stared openly at Stalls. "Is that an English name by chance?" he asked.

"No," and Stalls wasn't sure how to address the Captain, "sir," he added. "It's a French name if I remember," and he affected what he guessed to be the French pronunciation, changing the "bin" to "ban". He explained that he wasn't sure. The Captain looked as though he wished Stalls had said he was English.

"The Marquis de Sade was French, was he not?" the Captain asked.

"I'm sure he was," Stalls responded somewhat startled by the odd connection the Captain made.

The waiters staggered into the dining room with their arms encircling dishes heaped with steaming potatoes. They set the dishes on a small serving table. Stalls was gladened to see that the old sea-wise legs of the waiters had as much trouble with the rise and fall of the ship as he had.

Each of the officers, beginning with the Captain, told the waiters what they wanted for lunch. Stalls consulted the menu lying beside his plate. THE HEAD STEAM & MOTOR SHIP LINE it read in large black letters at the top. Beneath that was drawn a red hand, palm out, severed at the wrist.

Drops of blood fringed the cut. It was the same hand he had seen painted on the Benwee's funnel. He realized looking at it again on the menu that it was a left hand. The waiter stood beside him expectantly waiting for his order. He opened the menu. The choice was between cod chowder and ox tail stew. He chose the stew. The waiter allowed a knowing smile, as though he had made a good choice.

The stew, brown and watery, remained level to the world as the bowls and ship rolled beneath it. Mr. Kerr had been the only one to order the cod chowder. It was thick with potatoes and did not move in the bowls as much. They ate in silence except for the clicking of spoons on china. The waiters laid out plates of boiled and scalloped potatoes beside each man. Steam rose in little plumes from the food. As soon as a plate was finished it was replaced with a full one. Stalls began to feel that perhaps the silence of the officers was because of him, the passenger, and they were all waiting politely for him to break the silence.

He finished his bowl of stew and before he could protest it was refilled. An ox's caudal bone shone white at the bottom, cogged and round like a gear. Everyone else took second's without being asked. Except for Mr. Kerr who still ate slowly and with patience from his bowl of chowder and original plate of potatoes. Stalls cleared his throat before starting his second bowl, already full from the plate of potatoes.

"Is it always *this* rough, Captain Trillick?" Spoons

paused in mid-air. The ship rolled ponderously to the star-board, the bow lifting to the sky, and Mr. Whitly, concern marking his brow, held a napkin to his mouth.

Captain Trillick looked up from his stew and placed his spoon at the side of his bowl.

"It's the smoothest voyage we've had all spring," answered the Captain seriously without changing his expression. The melodic clank of shifting dishes, bowls and glasses accompanied his soft courteous voice.

Stalls wondered for the first time why he had thought that taking a merchant ship across the North Atlantic might be a worthy break with his past. Seven days at sea took on another connotation as the dark hills of water topped with white caps rythmically filled the portholes behind the Captain. The other men had gone back to eating, or since the waiters had poured out tea and creamers filled with milk, sipped thoughtfully at their steaming cups.

Stalls took his tea without any milk. He tried to remember what she looked like but he couldn't and it filled him with a sudden and immense feeling of relief. Ten years of his life melted away in one brilliant moment of faulty recollection.

"Um wurried about me wife an' fam'ly . . . " Mr. Frisby, the Chief Engineer, was saying as Stalls finished his tea. Mr. Frisby sat across from him. He looked short and stocky much like a whisky barrel with thick stubby arms and legs stuck to it. Although he couldn't see them hidden by the

table, Stalls thought that his feet might be barely touching the carpeted floor with his toes, because the Chief rolled about in his chair. Only by bracing one arm against the chair could he steady himself to eat. His bulbous nose and puffy cheeks had a curious livid tinge to them from a tangle of burst capillaries.

"'Ow many did they kill this time?" Mr. Singleton fixed his jaundiced eyes on Mr. Kerr, who leaned over his plate of potatoes in apparent disinterest.

"A y'ung mann an' 'is gurrl friend," answered Mr. Bower in a smooth, uncommitted voice. He had the simple countenance of Stan Laurel but with a broader face, fine wispy blond hair, and flat eyes that betrayed not a trace of humor. He was the officer that had argued with the seamen on the foredeck.

The air felt close in the dining room and Stalls knew but couldn't explain the tension among the officers. The waiters seemed to have disappeared after serving tea. A silence ensued Mr. Bower's statement that was the same as the one Stalls thought he had caused when he first entered the room. His stomach felt queasy. The energy of a malignant air settled on the table and all the colors became harsh and painful to his eyes, the glacial white of the tablecloth beneath the flashing brilliance of moving cutlery and the tiny splashes of red from the miniature hands on the menus.

"It's not just the Catholics, you know," the Captain said in an even measured voice, as though this were the end

product of hours of rumination. "The wholesale involvement of foreign financed insurgents dominates the IRA. It is my opinion that this obviates, if you will, the righteousness of any act, violent or otherwise by the Catholics." The Captain sat very straight in his chair and by some ability rode the movements of the ship as though he were screwed to it, a part of the brasswork, cold and polished.

Stalls noticed Captain Trillick's hand for the first time. It was child-like and wizened, half the size of the other, his right hand. His left arm was small too and the sleeve of his blue officer's jacket hung loosely and untailored from the padded shoulder. All the officers, except the Steward Whitly, who busied himself with pouring milk into his tea, stared openly at Mr. Kerr. The Captain carefully wiped his mouth on the napkin in his malformed hand. Stalls stared at Mr. Kerr too. The waiters returned to the dining room with trays of dessert and set a bowl of pudding before each man. They left quietly. No one moved to touch the pudding, not even Mr. Whitly, who had set down his tea. They all waited and were patient, as if time were dimensioned by the unending roll of the Benwee. They had been over this before and as long as they sat there silently waiting for Mr. Kerr to speak they would not move.

"Ayye . . . " Mr. Kerr said slowly with no trace of meaning, no affirmation or denial. He folded his napkin and laid it by his untouched bowl of pudding and without acknowledging anyone in particular bowed his head, stood, and with

shoulders squared strode from the room.

Mr. Bower, the Second Engineer, leaned across the table towards Stalls and informed him, "Oour Mistairr Kayrr is frrum the South." The cold edge to his voice did not ease the tension.

"Ee's the unly Catholic amung us, ya see," Mr. Singleton added, more to the point. And now, they all looked at him, waiting to see what he would say. To discover if he was Catholic too.

Stalls did not know what to say. His throat worked and it felt dry. Was he Catholic? He could not remember. Had there been something on the ticket that identified his religion? A wind seemed to blow through him. Spray lifted lazily above the bow through the porthole.

He had read about the trouble in Northern Ireland but now here it was right in his lap. There were Catholics in his family buy he felt no special allegiance for them. He couldn't remember if he had been baptized and if that would make him Catholic or not or just another Christian. Some of the men had begun to eat their pudding. He looked down at it, a glutinous yellow mass smothering two pieces of spongy looking bread.

"Um wurried aboot me fam'ly is all . . . " Mr. Frisby began again but the Captain cut him off:

"What do you do for a living Mr. Corbin?" They watched him eat his pudding. It tasted bland and very sweet to Stalls.

"Actually," and Stalls paused to wipe his mouth with

his napkin.

"Are you a teacher by chance?"

"No," he answered.

"Hmmm," and the Captain pondered this between bites of pudding. "Do you like to read?"

"Well, yes, I guess I do." He wondered where this was leading and glanced at Mr. Whitly who studied his dessert with great interest, pushing the pieces of pudding soaked bread about his bowl.

"I read myself," the Captain said. It sounded like idle chat but Stalls felt that the Captain had some design for him. "You must come up to my cabin and see my little library."

"Of course," he answered and felt that there wasn't much choice in the matter.

"There is one book in particular that I think you might find most fascinating," and the Captain turned to Mr. Whitly. "You are nearly done with it, aren't you Mr. Whitly?"

Mr. Whitly had just put one of the pudding breads into his mouth and he paused in that position, spoon sticking in his mouth. His eyes lost touch for a moment and searched the room. He removed his spoon and swallowed hurriedly.

"Um, yes sir. Nearly finished, sir," he said pinned beneath the gaze of the Captain.

The Captain turned back to Stalls. He held a menu before him. "Have you read the legend yet? About the hand?" He turned the menu over. "It's on the back--very interesting

indeed--prophetic you might say. It's part of the Official Crest of Ulster."

Stalls turned over his menu and looked at the back. "The Legend of the Wine Red Hand," it read. Evidently long ago two wealthy and powerful men, landed in England for some obscure reason, contested the kingship of Ireland. Scores of brave men had been slain and the quantity of their blood stained the ground. So the two men consulted a prophet who proclaimed that the one who should first set his hand on the soil of Ireland would be King.

Without delay the two set off for Ireland aboard their ships. They arrived off the rocky coast of Ireland at precisely the same time and encountered not only stormy seas but an impassable surf. Neither could land and claim the Irish throne without surely losing his life in the thundering walls of water crashing on the beach. One of the noblemen would not be denied and taking up his sword he chopped off his left hand; whereupon he cast it ashore. Thus he was the first to touch Ireland. Thus he became King.

Stalls looked up from the menu at the Captain. A fine sheen of sweat had formed on the Captain's forehead.

"An interesting tale, wouldn't you say Mr. Corbin. Certainly there's a message there for us all." He stood up. "Perhaps after dinner you would like to drop by my cabin and we can talk some more." He made as though to leave and paused, addressing the other men now, "I understand that there has been another bombing. Two dead and five maimed."

The Captain left the room limping.

Stalls looked at Mr. Whitly who was talking to Mr. Frisby and he recalled last night when he found the Chief Steward in the Officer's Salon, his face hidden beneath *Topaz*. He wondered if that was the book that the Captain spoke of. None of it made sense. The voice of Mr. Frisby broke loudly across the table:

"Me fam'ly, yes me fam'ly-- I 'ave a gurrl . . . a gurrl Melissa an' ah boy . . . ah--ah boy . . . ahh-bah, ahh-bah--ah *Bah!*" Mr. Frisby's face became terribly red and contorted. He had one hand on his throat and pointed at it with the other as he choked on the name of his boy. The rest of the men remained silent and expressionless except for Mr. Singleton whose lips twitched about, forming and erasing a sickly smile.

Mr. Frisby's whole upper body spasmed and Stalls felt the torture of the poor man.

"Ahh-bah, ahh-*Bah!*" and with a shock Stalls realized that what he had taken as Mr. Frisby's inability to remember his son's name was in fact a speech impediment. All the other officers still at the table were obviously accustomed to such outbursts from the Chief. Yet, they made no attempt to help him over the block.

Mr. Whitly stood and excused himself while the Chief, still clutching his throat uttered one more *ah-bah* and gave it up. Stalls stood and nodding to the remaining men left the room on shakey legs, the floor tilting crazily beneath

him. He made his way aft along the passageway to his cabin. The rumbling, almost chanting voice of Mr. McMahon came from the cabin next to his as he passed it. He paused to listen, the words of the song thickened by the Scottish dialect, seemed at the edge of his understanding. He only stopped for a moment but by the time he moved on again the ship had rolled away from him and where his left foot had expected sound deck it met air. With an awkward attempt to correct after it's too late, he imitated his dining room entrance and took three floundering strides to the opposite wall. It halted his progress with a thud, Jesus!, he thought, massaging his shoulder and managed to hurriedly brace his feet against the next roll of the ship, the bow pitching up at the same time. When he opened the door to his cabin he discovered the Steward on his hands and knees fumbling with a piece of chain attached to the bottom of the chair. The movements of the ship made it difficult for him to hold the chair still. He looked up in surprise, mild embarrassment colored his cheeks.

"Just securing your chair, Mr. Corbin. If it gets much rougher this chair wouldn't be much use to you."

Stalls recovered quickly and balancing as best he could held the chair to the floor as Mr. Whitly fastened the chain. It didn't hold the chair tight, allowing it to slide an inch or two back and forth with each roll. A creaking sound of complaint came from the woodwork in the small cabin that he hadn't noticed before. On the desk sat a copy of *Topaz* and

beside it a bottle of White Horse scotch.

Mr. Whitly stood and smoothing back his hair gestured nervously at the bottle. "Thought ya could use a wee bit o' the stuff," he affected. "Perhaps we could have a little chat?" he added.

Stalls didn't understand why everyone on board was so polite. Quite mistakenly he thought there was something he had missed, or something he had forgotten to do or say that accounted for the obsequiousness, their subtle way of marshalling life on board the Benwee.

After Captain Trillick left the dining room he climbed up to the bridge and checked on the course change made in the morning. He stood and looked forward through the thick glass as the Benwee's bow plunged through the swells that were more like mountainous waves. Spray from the driving force of the little freighter wetted the foredeck. He took it in with a practiced eye. The tarpaulins lay flat and snug over the hatches and the brilliant yellow of the tractors rose and fell with the ship. He had not liked the attitude of the boatswain. But it did not overly concern him. As commander of his ship, he knew that there were more important issues near at hand. Yet, he still must keep an eye out he knew, and turning to look windward he thought he caught the helmsman watching him. Trillick could not remember the seaman's name so he ignored him. He decided to check with Sparks about anymore news before he went to his

cabin. Fifteen years he had made the run between St. John, New Brunswick and Glasgow across the North Atlantic, and even with a little spring blow, by God, he could Captain his ship blindfolded and full to the scuppers with gin like his Chief Engineer. Even with a First Mate he did not trust.

He leaned into the chart room and watched Mr. Kerr for a moment arched over the maps like a raven-haired gargoyle. "Don't change course without consulting me," he told Mr. Kerr.

"Ayye," the mate drawled without looking up.

The Captain snorted, ayy my fat arse you black-haired son-of-a-whore, he thought. He stopped off in the radio room on his way to his cabin. There was no news except that they could expect 10 to 15 foot waves, or they could expect 15 to 20 foot waves. It was that uncertain still. No gale warning out yet and even the prospect of that did not bother him. He did detect a certain reluctance on the part of Sparks discussing the bombings. Another one he must keep his eye on. The wise and critical eye of a ship's Master is never still, he thought.

Careful of the movements of the ship, the Captain climbed down the narrow stairs to his cabin below the bridge. He poured himself a drink and standing, legs braced, before his Gauguin he pondered the course of history of Northern Ireland. He felt no affection or brotherhood for the Free State to the south. After all these years of uneventful sailing through some of the wildest waters in the world he

had accumulated thousands of hours searching for an immutable truth. Ignorance he felt was the breeding ground for intolerance. So he read.

Part of the science of learning he felt involved the enigmatic role of women in world history and to this he applied himself. Just recently he had achieved a simple and what he thought, a logical answer, to the enigma. He had tested it on Mr. Whitly, who, until then, he believed an open and intelligent man. He had hoped that *Topaz* might help.

He grew tired of standing and sat down in one of the arm-chairs. The scotch eased the pain in his elbow and from long habit he began to massage it. Before he fell asleep he thought of the letter he had received in St. John from his wife in Belfast. She complained as usual about not having enough money, but his gorge rose, making him tense with anger, when she mentioned quite casually toward the end that she had taken out his silver-blue Vauxhall and, by way of an explanation that defied any natural earthbound laws of cause and affect, managed to smash in one fender. Sleep did not come easily to him. He wished with all his heart that she would take the twin girls and leave him in peace. She had once told him that there was no love in him, and little did she know, nor did he readily admit that long ago as a small boy with a smaller left arm and a lame hip, he had decided that love would always be a figment in his life. That is the sort of boy he had become.

Stalls thanked Mr. Whitly for the whisky. The Steward explained, after some hesitation that it was against regulations for him to be drinking at sea without consent of the Captain. Stalls had already poured him a drink so rather than see it poured back into the bottle Mr. Whitly said he would drink it, as long as Stalls understood the circumstances. Stalls sat on his bunk and offered the chair to Mr. Whitly.

"I see you brought me the book, too," Stalls said by way of breaking the brief silence.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Whitly said non-committally and nodded at the book. "Confidentially I haven't quite finished it but I thought that perhaps the Captain would want you to have a go at it."

Stalls found this all very odd. "What does the Captain find so," and he paused searching for the right word, "interesting, I guess, about this book."

"I'm not sure. The Captain said nothing to us about what exactly it contains that he finds so important. But this is not the first time he has asked us to read something." He shuddered from the lurking memory of the conversation he'd had with the Captain about women. He felt no ability to accurately recreate it for Mr. Corbin. So even though it was on the tip of his tongue he did not mention it. He drank some whisky instead.

"It isn't?" Stalls asked, puzzled.

"Isn't what?"

"The only book."

"Oh, as a matter of fact it isn't." Mr. Whitly poured more whisky into their glasses. "I hoped that you might help me decipher this book."

Stalls paused to take a sip from his glass and eyed the book on the desk with a heightened wariness. "I don't read much," he confessed.

They sipped whisky together. Stalls felt it begin to warm his stomach and for a while he stopped fighting the ship.

"What do you do? If I may ask? For work I mean," Mr. Whitly asked.

The question took him a little by surprise. He had not been prepared when the Captain asked him in the dining room and was glad when he did not pursue it. For some reason it felt uncomfortable discussing what he felt was behind him, including being a mechanic. He shrugged, "I'm a mechanic, an auto mechanic."

Mr. Whitly nodded his head wisely, as though this were important and sobering news. The whisky had begun to flush his cheeks.

"Would you like to see the engine room?" he asked Stalls.

Before he could evade his desire he had answered yes. They finished their whiskies and made their way, loose limbed, to a door along the passageway. It opened into the core of the ship. Before they entered Mr. Whitly paused and explained in serious tones that the Benwee was a relatively

small diesel powered motor ship.

"Only a modest little ship, you see!" he shouted as he opened the door and they stepped into the bright cavern of the engine room, the heart of the Benwee. The tremendous roar of the pounding engine enfolded them. They stood near the top on a metal grill platform suspended from the bulkhead. A ladder descended to another grill walkway that surrounded the engine. Far below, the base of the engine rested on a steel deck well below the water line. For stability Stalls thought, of course; and the sheer size and syncopated ocean of sound of the room washed from him all pretense of self-defense. Magnificent, he thought.

"This is it!" he said not knowing what he meant.

"Oh, yes, quite!" Mr. Whitly cheered at his elbow.

The change from cool to hot air was like stepping into a sauna and sweat began to dampen his clothes and bead up on his forehead.

Mr. Whitly, sweating too, leaned close and shouted that he thought the Chief Engineer, Mr. Frisby, might be below on the lower deck. Stalls inhaled the air filled with the heavy odor of fresh oil and his eyes filled with the polished gleam of the engine. On the far bulkhead, the largest piston he had ever seen hung in giant brackets, its connecting rod hidden behind the massive head of the engine. He pointed at it as a child would do, wordlessly asking its name, and he thought he heard Mr. Whitly yell that it was a spare.

A sailor in dungarees and grease blackened hands made

room for them to pass. He nodded to them. They found the Chief in shirt sleeves, leaning over a small pump disassembled on a work bench. The Second Engineer, Mr. Bower, stood beside him. The Chief nodded his head and a smile touched his lips when Mr. Whitly explained that he had brought Mr. Corbin to see the engine room. The Chief spread his arms and shouted something. Stalls didn't understand. Whitly cupped his hands around his mouth:

"He calls them his 'Babies', the engine!"

Stalls nodded and smiled. "Very nice!" he yelled.

The Chief concentrated as Whitly leaned close to speak again. He told him that Mr. Corbin was a mechanic and this pleased the Chief immensely. They toured the mass of the lower engine, and walked aft to where the shaft quited the engine and ran back to the screw. The smoothly spinning shaft, thick as a 50 gallon drum, gleamed in the dim light of the tunnel.

They returned to the main engine and stood admiring its great bulk. In the instant that Stalls wished the moment would last beyond the limits of time he knew that it wouldn't. And even though the events would later prove to be the result of an evil design, he had the bad luck to feel himself a Jonah as he watched the Chief cock his head forward, as though hearing something for the first time. Stalls knew the Chief must know every nuance of his engine, every tiny inflection of its multitude of voices, each one telling him something different. Concern crossed the Chief's brow.

Stalls felt himself go cold inside, and he turned his ear to the engine too. He could discern nothing from the huge noise of the pistons.

The look on the Chief's face went blank and he stood leaning forward and rigid like a bird dog on point. Even Mr. Whitly noticed him and Mr. Bower drew up close beside them, he too leaning, rag in hand, on point. Sudden alarm seized the Chief and he spun on his heel and ran to the controls and rang the throttle to half-speed. Men Stalls hadn't noticed before appeared at the various levels of the catwalks surrounding the engine. A whistle blew and pulling it angrily from the pipe the Chief began to yell into it.

"The bridge," Mr. Whitly said by way of explaining the whistle and pipe. He shrugged, and leaning close, told him that the Benwee was due for an overhaul at the end of this run. But he didn't know what this was all about.

Bearing, Stalls thought, and not a small bearing but one the size of a truck tire.

As the Second Engineer huddled with the Chief, Whitly suggested they go topside. They made their way back up the catwalks past the curious men to the door they had entered. As they stepped out the engine slowed again to quarter speed.

Missing at dinner were the First Mate, Mr. Kerr, and the Chief and Second Engineer. Everyone ate quietly, the

air somber with the prospect of limping into a possible gale. The darkened evening ocean through the forward port-holes filled with the spectors of ever greater swells, still unbreaking, but rising up like dark brutal mountains full of ominous power before the Benwee's bow. No longer did the freighter breast the wave with full power but rose instead with the reluctance of a ponderous barge at quarter speed. The Captain had turned the ship more into the waves so the roll diminished but the rise and fall became much more abrupt. Everyone at the table ate carefully. There was no choice at this meal so they all ate corned beef and cabbage and potatoes.

Before he entered the dining room, Stalls met Mr. Whitly coming down from the bridge. He explained that the Chief Engineer had decided that he would not run the engine faster than quarter speed and that only at half-speed if absolutely necessary. The decision before them now, or before the Captain was to either turn back to St. John or expect to take three weeks to get to Glasgow. Not to mention getting pushed off-course by the storm. Stalls asked him what he thought Captain Trillick would do. Mr. Whitly shrugged and lifted his eyebrows.

"There's icebergs too you know," Mr. Whitly added stroking the smooth unblemished skin of his chin.

"Icebergs?"

"Oh yes, on occasion quite definitely," and he shrugged again.

A blanket of sleet engulfed the foredeck and hurled itself against the superstructure sounding like grapeshot when it hit the glass of the portholes. Dishes and cups rattled and clinked together with the rise and fall of the ship. Not a soothing melody of noise.

The Captain cleared his throat as though to speak but did not. They all waited for dessert as the table was cleared. The waiters brought more tea. Stalls tried his with milk this time and thought the flavor odd.

They were served the same soggy pudding as they'd had at lunch. The Captain stood to leave first. He cleared his throat again.

"Can I expect you, Mr. Corbin?" he asked.

At first Stalls had no idea what he expected and then with some embarrassment remembered the Captain's invitation to stop by his cabin.

"Yes, of course," he answered and for no good reason he could think of stood and did a little rolling bow, legs pinned against the table.

The Captain nodded and stricken with the misfortune of his predicament he left the room limping. All the men but Mr. Kerr watched the Captain leave.

"'Is leg is painin' him again," observed Mr. Gardner, the Second Mate. Nobody responded and with the single-mindedness of clockwork men fell upon their bowls of pudding the color of pus. Stalls did not eat his and excusing himself made to leave. As he passed Mr. McMahon's table the

old man reached out a hand and looking up at him with concern said something quite unintelligible.

"Yes," he told the old gentleman and left before he could mumble anything else.

Only when he got to his cabin and sat unsteadily at the little desk did he recall Mr. Whitly mentioning that there was another passenger, a woman named Miss Carson, aboard. He wondered why he hadn't seen her. A travel agent Mr. Whitly had said, and he found that hard to believe.

With paper and pen at hand he tried to write a letter to someone he knew. The only person he could think of was her, at home on a beach towel, its colors ablaze in the desert sun. And he thought he had come so close to forgetting her.

He put his coat on and taking the paper and pencil went out on deck, into the wind and driving rain and sleet blowing aft. He dropped the paper and pencil over the side and like magic they instantly disappeared into the black shroud of the storm. One moment they were there and then they weren't. That simple. The cold wind and frozen rain beat against him and stung his face and hands. He couldn't tell if it was salt spray from the ocean or tears that ran down his cheeks and filled his mouth.

High above on the flying bridge the Captain stood taking a breath of fresh air, his back to the storm, looking into the blackness from which they had come. For an instant he thought he saw a man down on the passenger's deck throw

a pure white dove into the void. But he knew too much to be tricked so easily and he wisely guessed that his eyes had fooled him.

Stalls stood outside the Captain's cabin in the act of knocking when he heard angry voices from within. Abruptly the door opened and he stood facing the grim visage of Mr. Kerr. Behind him stood the Captain leaning forward on his good arm braced on his desk. The Captain trembled with rage.

"You'll not change the course, Mr. Kerr. I'll confine you to quarters if you do!" the Captain said on the verge of shouting.

Mr. Kerr brushed by him and stamped down the passageway. Stalls saw that Mr. Whitly and the Chief Engineer were also in the cabin. Mr. Whitly looked shaken, the color of his face pale and anemic. The Chief sat low in an arm-chair hiding behind a glass of gin.

The Captain, seeing Stalls standing in the doorway, motioned for him to enter. The anger left the Captain's face and he sat down. Mr. Whitly barely nodded at Stalls still looking as though he were ensconced, a man in the act of withdrawing. The Captain gestured for Stalls to sit down and sliding open his desk drawer wanted to know if he would like a sea-sucker. Stalls could not imagine what they were. The Captain offered him a choice of dark chocolate or caramel. He chose a dark chocolate but not because

he remembered that Mr. Whitly had asked him too. The Captain handed him a cellophane wrapped sucker that looked like a wad of tar stuck on a white cardboard stick.

"Superb candies," the Captain said, "they last for a day."

Stalls nodded his understanding and put the sucker in his pocket.

"Would you like a drink, too, perhaps?" the Captain offered. The giving and acceptance of the small sucker released some inner tension and he felt suddenly expansive and warmhearted toward his young passenger.

Mr. Whitly fixed Stalls a scotch and water.

"If you have business to discuss, maybe I could come back later," Stalls offered.

"No, no. Not at all," the Captain insisted. "Just a minor disagreement is all. No problems at all. Isn't that right Chief?"

The Chief nodded and took another sip of his gin. His eyes, bloodshot, as though someone had gouged at them, remained fixed on the moving fluid in his glass. His babies were sick and with a great swelling of superstition he envisioned the massive engine groaning to a complete stop.

"Ah," he started, "bah," he managed.

Before the door opened Sparks had already heard the approaching footsteps. It would be the First Mate he knew. He knew each officer's tread, fair weather or foul. It was

his job to listen and at this he was good. The First Mate's stride was long and his heels struck firmly on the metal deck.

Mr. Kerr, bracing himself on the doorjamb, leaned his head into the radiator room. They stared at each other for a moment. For the first time Willowbee could hear the sound of the rising wind, louder now with the diminished throb of the engines. The mate didn't have to ask him.

"Gale force by morning, most likely," he said.

Mr. Kerr nodded his agreement and before he could extricate himself from the door Willowbee stopped him with hand and opened mouth. The question formed for which he knew the answer, fearing for himself now as much as for Sherry.

"He's not turning back," he said as much as asked.

"Aye," Mr. Kerr answered and the timber of his voice and black angry eyes bit like cold steel into Willowbee's soul.

His feet fixed, he stood in the small doorway and watched the First Mate mount the stairs to the bridge.

Captain Trillick swayed with the ship, balancing on toe and then heel, before his beloved picture of the virgin native. He had briefly explained to Mr. Corbin his reasoning for breasting the storm under quarter power, enough to maintain a position except in a full gale. They were bound for overhaul at the end of this run. No one spoke

now and it was silent but for the muffled howl of the wind, the sound of a neighbor dog beckoning the moon.

Mr. Frisby buried his face in his glass of gin.

There was a muffled tapping at the door and Whitly rose to open it. Mr. McMahon, off balance by the suddenly opened door and fall of the Benwee's bow into a deep trough, bolted into the cabin. With a startled unintelligible cry he sprawled across the Captain's desk and clutched at its edges as the ship shuddered almost to a dead stop, heading for the bottom, before it regained its bouyancy and began a rapid and sickening rise to the crest. The door slammed as Whitly, desperately hanging onto its knob disappeared into the passageway. Stalls and the Captain had taken to the green carpeted floor and held onto opposing legs of Mr. Frisby's overstuffed chair. Except for rudely pitching forward when the bow buried itself in the wave Mr. Frisby now leaned back into the comfortable chair like a man on the first steep upward leg of a rollercoaster. He smiled in expectation and sipped at his gin.

"Welcome to the Captain's cabin," Mr. Frisby cheered Mr. McMahon, "It's ah, ah--ah, bah, ah--be, ah--*beauty* of a wave!"

The Benwee charged headlong into the next wave.

Stalls felt warm breath on his cheek and smelled the medicinal odor of freshly drunk scotch that hasn't turned sour yet; and she was there again inside him with the taste of whisky and cigarettes on her tongue as it touched

him for the very first time that afternoon so many year ago. Years compressed into a taste and touch. Her lips were soft and yielding to his, her heart beat against his before she leaned back above him and he stroked her. Her long chesnut hair touched him like silk. As she guided him to her and together breeched the afternoon forever, he could never be sure that in finding her he had lost her too. With mixed emotions he had watched the black cat prance at the foot of the bed afterwards, its eyes full of feline intent. They had never spoken of it, but he knew now that she must have felt the same. By some simple quirk of fate that had brought them close enough to touch they both felt the need to seal it. Two months later, both searching for the right word besides love, some sign that would ensure that it would work forever, they were married. . .

He looked up into the face of the Captain whose light blue eyes, edged with a fiery rim of lid, fixed on his.

"Have you started *Topaz* yet?"

"No," Stalls answered and the first true inkling of fear inched its way up his spine like a dream gone bad.

"I'll give you something to ponder while you read it," and the Captain paused to sip clumsily from his empty glass, "you're a bright lad I think, you'll understand," he said as much to Stalls as to himself.

The Benwee tilted and raced to the crest.

"It's the women you see."

A cryptic man, Stalls thought, hang on here we go;

and the freighter flung up its fantail as though it were a giant teeter-totter and crashed down the back of what seemed to be an endless series of monster waves.

The cabin door flew open again and Mr. Whitly stood, legs widely braced. A wild look came to his face, his mouth open, as he looked at Mr. McMahon still covering the wide mahogany desk like a beached walrus the sea had washed up.

The Captain slid a few inches away down the rug. "It's the women," he persisted, and he dropped his voice to a whisper barely audible above the moan of the wind in the rigging. "They're not of this world," he hissed. "They think different than us, they speak a different language."

"How's that?" Stalls was not sure he understood. His misgivings about the Captain revealed themselves like discovering that the thick mud on your heel isn't mud at all. And he had his eye on the still figure of Mr. McMahon.

"Martians." The Captain elbowed his way closer again. "They're Martians, you see!" his voice rising as Mr. Whitly gave a high keening yell and freeing a hand for a moment from the knob pointed at the still figure of Mr. McMahon.

Although the Captain was quick, Stalls managed to stand first and timing his movements pulled himself uphill to the desk. Mr. McMahon had begun to gently slide back and forth in the slickness of his blood on the varnish. Stalls first thought that somehow he must have impaled himself on a receipt or note spike resting on the desk top. But there seemed too much blood for that. As the ship fell

off the crest he felt a push from behind as the Captain careened into him and together they fell across Mr. McMahon's back, his uncongealed blood staining them. Mr. Whitly none too adeptly joined them atop the old Scot.

"My God," Mr. Whitly whispered now, his voice almost reverent. Afraid to upset the tentative balance he did not release his grip on the desk of the Scot's sleeve. "Is he dead?"

Captain Trillick held the knuckles of his crippled hand to the old man's throat. Stalls thought perhaps a faint grim smile passed across the Captain's lips, the look of a man unsurprised by this particular death. Almost a grim satisfaction at this discovery, Stalls thought. The Captain suggested they get the old man into the desk chair so in an awkward dance of tilting angles the three of them slid the dead weight head first into the chair where somehow Mr. Whitly and Stalls righted him and held him there. Captain Trillick had turned and begun to fit a key into the bottom drawer of his desk.

"Christ," Mr. Whitly hissed under his breath, struggling to maintain his balance.

With some difficulty the Captain pulled the drawer out.

Stalls felt himself on the jittery edge of an adrenalin rush, his body tensed and fighting the ship and the sight of the absolute calm of the dead Scot's face. For the first time he noticed the strong odor of tobacco and he could not remember ever seeing the old man smoke. There was also the

acrid odor of burned gun powder.

The Captain made no attempt to disguise his intent. Both Stalls and Mr. Whitly could see what he was after. The gleam of gunmetal moved in the bottom of the drawer and the green and yellow boxes of Remington ammunition. Captain Trillick took out two Colt .45 Commanders and a 9mm Browning Semi-automatic. For want of a place where the pistols would not slide around he laid them in the old Scot's lap.

"Watch these," he told them, though it was unnecessary, and crouched over the drawer again and removed two fully loaded clips for each pistol. Then he closed the drawer but did not lock it.

Stalls mouth felt dry and glancing at Mr. Whitly he wondered if he looked as frightened. Solemnly and tense with concentration Captain Trillick inserted a clip into each piece. He straightened up and leaning against the solid desk made his clear intentions even clearer.

"It is the three of us now," he said looking at them as though this simple line would decipher the situation.

A wan look of confused despair fixed on Mr. Whitly's face.

"I cannot trust Mr. Frisby here," and the Captain looked at the slumbering form of the Chief Engineer, his plump red hands clutching his glass of gin to his lap.

Mr. Whitly nodded his head.

Stalls looked back down at Mr. McMahon.

"He's quite dead," the Captain said.

Stalls felt he had good reason not to blindly trust the Captain. "What's happening?" and he paused, "Captain."

Captain Trillick, fully prepared for this question, did not hesitate. "At first I thought that the engine trouble might have been genuine, that is it wasn't, you might say, manufactured. Mr. Frisby here hasn't been able to tell me one way or the other so after some deliberation I decided the wisest course was to assume that it is in fact a ruse."

"Sabotage?" Mr. Whitly asked, his voice strained.

"Yes, after a fashion," the Captain answered.

"But, but . . ." Mr. Whitly said indicating the body of Mr. McMahon.

The Captain ignored him for the moment and after putting the Browning in his coat pocket he handed them each a .45 and an extra clip.

"Are you familiar with semi-automatic pistols?" the Captain asked Stalls. Mr Whitly held his with open displeasure and did not seem to know what to do with it, reluctant to put it in his coat pocket as the Captain had done.

Stalls did not answer.

"Some individuals mistake these pistols as fully automatic. After you chamber the first round and trigger it, the slide automatically ejects the spent casing, recocks the trigger, chambers another round and is ready to fire again. But it will only fire again if you actuate the trigger. That is why it is semi-automatic."

Stalls had shot pistols, even semi-automatics like the Captain's, a few times. He knew he could hit an old refrigerator and the rusted out hulk of a '52 Ford pickup at ten paces. Beyond that he had no idea. More than anything he did not appreciate what he mistakenly took to be the Captain's cavalier attitude.

"I killed a pickup once," he told the Captain.

"That may not be enough this time," the Captain answered, his eyes tightening with anger his voice did not betray. He was serious and calm, he wasn't cavalier.

Stalls thought it over. "Why?" he asked.

Mr. Whitly finally put his pistol in his coat pocket.

"There is going to be an attempt to take over the Benwee." The Captain gestured at the dead Scot. "This is the beginning."

Stalls caught himself as the ship lunged forward into another wave. "Why?" he asked again.

"I've had my suspicions of the First Mate, Mr. Kerr, for some time now. Naturally I communicated them to Mr. McMahon the minute he boarded in St. John."

"But who is Mr. McMahon?" Mr. Whitly asked. His confusion had begun to let go to resignation. But resigned to what he wasn't sure.

Stalls remembered the old Scot, catching at his arm and stopping him long enough to give him an enigmatic message in a language he did not understand. He thought the old man mad.

The Captain ignored Mr. Whitly's question. "Mr. Kerr is from the South, you know." The indictment was clear in his voice.

For a moment Stalls was lost. South of what?

Mr. Whitly cleared his throat. "Free Irish, he means."

The Captain turned on Mr. Whitly. "Free!" he shrilled at him, "free from what? Answer me that," and he turned on Stalls. The Captain's face had turned red and splotchy with emotion. "There are those of us who are Loyalists and those who are not. It's that simple," he told him.

"It's the cargo," Mr. Whitly said to no one in particular. He was just thinking out loud.

"Ahhh," the sleeping Mr. Frisby said.

"That's it," the Captain said. "We often carry perishable goods used as dog food filler. There is a special compartment aboard for keeping beef lung and other animal parts."

"But they're not beef lungs this time."

Mr. Frisby snorted. No one knew what he was dreaming.

Captain Trillick regained his composure. Filled now instead with the intrigue of his mission. "As a matter of fact they are beef lungs," and edge of triumph to his voice.

"But, but?" Mr. Whitly was lost again himself.

"They're stowed in the Miss Melody." A stroke of genius the Captain thought, a hold within a hold, one small boat within one small ship.

"What are stowed . . ." Stalls started.

"Miss Melody!" Mr. Whitly finished, alarmed.

"Ba, ba, baahh." Even in his dreams Mr. Frisby could not say his children's names without halting.

"The plastic explosive and automatic rifles." The Captain felt exasperated. He shook his good fist in their faces. "Guns and bombs," he said through his teeth.

"Jesus save us," Mr. Whitly whispered.

"No he won't," the Captain warned.

Stalls realized now that the guns must be for Ulstermen. For Protestants in Belfast.

Mr. Whitly drew himself up and faced the Captain.

"Does the Head Office know?" and pausing for air that was hard to come by, "I was certainly never apprised . . . "

"Of course they know," the Captain cut him off.

Stalls could tell that the Captain lied. For reasons he could not decipher he began to envision the sequence of events unfolding with the ineluctable progress of a repeating bad dream. In the breast pocket of Mr. McMahon, just above where he had been shot, Stalls recognized the top portion of a ship's menu. The very tips of four red fingers peaked above the edge of the tartan cloth. He also realized that besides being dead the old Scot was soaking wet and that he must have been out on deck. A sense of foreboding pervaded Stalls. Something quite beyond the dread of the heavy lifeless body beneath his hands. The speed of adrenalin pulled taut the skin of his face, for he knew perhaps, that he had come face to face with his

fate.

The darkest of green curtains swayed before the port-holes barely stirring the stale air redolent with wet wool and cordite. Someone moaned and it was the wind outside. They stood behind him somewhere. He couldn't be sure that he hadn't been here before, as though he had forgotten the one little piece of memory, the tiniest but most significant detail. Where was the cat, black as a moonless night, that pranced for him, its yellow eyes so full of the simplest instinct: to run or not to run. To stay or not to stay.

"Leave him," the Captain said from the doorway. Mr. Whitly stood in the passageway behind the Captain. The Benwee's movements seemed less violent, the relentless thrashing replaced by long sustained rushes over the waves. The Captain stiffened his stance in the doorway, cocking his head.

"She's been turned," he said through clenched teeth. "Someone's turned her, can you feel it?" His eyes flashed toward Stalls. "We're quartering the waves." He quit the doorway and disappeared down the passageway.

Mr. Whitly gave Stalls a forlorn look, formulating a plan for his own survival far too late. Stalls followed them both, the pistol heavy in his hand. He had no idea where he was going.

Mr. Kerr stood hunched over the ship's log in the chart room, a steaming cup of tea and milk at his elbow that

Percy had brought him a moment before. He did not recognize the sound of the pistol report at first muffled as it was by the fierce wind. But as he reached for the hot tea his hand never closed on the thick crockery of the mug. Instead he found himself standing outside, pressed against the steel bulkhead of the bridge. Rain and salt spray filled his eyes. He turned to look aft. For a moment he felt sure that he had imagined that indistinct pop of a pistol. It could have been rigging on the aft booms snapping loose. Then he saw two dark figures embracing on the deck below, almost as though they were dancing. An ugly dance that he had seen before. He blinked away the salt water in time to watch the figures stagger to the rail and lean over tango-style with the heeling of the ship. This time he didn't hear the pistol but saw the muzzle flash light up the two. A man and a woman. Mr. Kerr did not move quickly but chose to edge along the bulkhead to the stairway leading to the deck below. He was unarmed. The two struggled before the woman's arm wrenched free and she fired wildly into the night. It was her last. The man ceased trying to disarm her and lifted her instead and with the air of the falling ship tossed her and her pistol into the depth of the angry sea.

Mr. Kerr froze halfway down the stairway. He did not hesitate to imagine that the ship should be stopped to search for this woman overboard. Instead he could not be sure that the man did not have a pistol too. This is what

he told himself. The other slipped and fell to the deck and Mr. Kerr watched as he laboriously regained his feet and made it to the bulkhead. In the brief light from the opened doorway he recognized Mr. McMahon, the old Scot.

As swiftly as he could, Mr. Kerr climbed down to the deck and kneeling, he played the flashlight he didn't remember picking up across the metal deck. He discovered diluted splotches of fresh blood.

Like anyone who is not squeemish at the sight of blood, he reached down and put his finger to the spot of watery blood. It dissolved in a sheet of ocean that washed the deck clean. Already soaked through he did not mind the flood of water. Now he kneeled transfixed by the touch of another's blood and the reverberations of his memory.

How long has it been now? he asked himself. Once again he had forgotten. Fifteen years? he thought, no. Twenty years since he left the world for the sea. He was twenty when he had knelt just the same way and reached down to touch the dark stains in the dirt of that alley in Belfast. Falls Road really because after all he was Catholic. Crouched there in the shadows fear squeezed him and he couldn't get his breath. For the first time in the long years of his youth he prayed to a god that he knew did not exist.

The two of them had run opposite directions when someone had sniped at them as they left his brother's flat. Each one chose his own dark hole to hide in. They had done it before. The impacting of the bullets sent brick dust into

the air and he remembered wondering how he had made it through so many. When he thought it safe he had doubled back and following the direction his brother had taken he discovered the splotches in the dirt .

He entered the black alley, a great obscurity of refuse and garbage from the shops facing the road. The sound of his scraping shoes filled him. He stopped and frightened of any noise he did not call his brother's name. Cairne, he did not call. In answer to his stealth he heard the muffled click of a familiar pocket knife locking open. He didn't see the flash of blade as his brother stepped from the darkness and swung his arm. Cairne! he yelled now. Cairne! and it echoed down the brick chasm. Somehow he ducked inside his brother's arm and they fell to the dirt and, the adrenalin still working, his brother struggled to kill him. Christ All Mighty, Cairne said through his stiffening lips, the steam from his breath hitting him in the face they were so close. It's me, he told Cairne, and Yes, Cairne said, I know.

A month later he turned his back on Ireland and lost himself at sea.

Mr. Kerr stood and reaching the rail on the bulkhead he leaned against the ship. Everything around him whistled and roared. He had seen storms before in the North Atlantic. Nothing about this one sounded different. He entered the passageway and slammed the iron door behind him. The occasional drop of blood led him to the Captain's cabin. It

did not occur to him to knock. Two figures sat lolling in their chairs. The old Scot, head on his chest, at the Captain's desk and across from him in the same attitude sat Mr. Frisby in the overstuffed armchair. He could tell the old Scot was dead so he waited patiently for the bow to rise and climbed uphill to the Chief's side. He touched the little man's shoulder.

"Achh!" Mr. Frisby said in his sleep.

Mr. Kerr realized that he must have passed out. The metallic odor of gin was a palpable thing in the air. A drawer in the Captain's desk slid open and banged closed with the rolling of the Benwee. Mr. Kerr did not touch the old Scot but eased around him to the loose drawer.

As he knelt down to extract the 9mm Browning the Captain had left behind he felt the roll of the ship change and he knew that someone had altered course again. Twice since he had left the bridge. Now someone had given the helm more power too.

Two people were dead and he didn't know why. He could guess. The Captain had armed himself, the open drawer told him that. Anger filled him as he realized that but for the luck of hearing the pistol shot that killed Mr. McMahon he'd be lying in his own blood on the bridge at the hands of his Captain. Ayee, he said to himself and clenching the Browning he left the cabin not sure of what he was about to do.

A large savage looking seaman in a dripping peacoat

stood at the helm. Stalls recognized him immediately as the seaman who had argued with the Second Mate about the loose tarp on the foredeck. He gave them only a cursory glance and continued to concentrate on steering the ship. He was having trouble maintaining a course that quartered the waves and for fear of broaching kept coming back head up into the sea.

All three of them had their pistols in their hands. At the seaman's feet lay the Second Mate a thin drool of blood on his cheek. It appeared that he might still be alive.

Mr. Whitly knelt to feel for a pulse at the mate's throat.

"He ain't a dead man yet," the seaman said.

"Bosun Frank," Captain Trillick spoke, identifying his enemy. He was not surprised nor was Bosun Frank who continued to watch the seas. He held the helm in an iron grip and as the bow tried to fall too far off the wave he would spin it furiously to bring it around. He did this over and over.

Stalls gripped a handrail by the door with his free hand while the Captain stood steadfast, maintaining his balance by a funny little dance and shuffle, crippled arm held close to his body, while he attempted to aim the 9mm at the Bosun.

"Stand away from the wheel," Captain Trillick ordered. His voice did not waver and his intention was clear.

"Hah!" Bosun Frank flashed black dangerous eyes at

the Captain. In the weak green wash of the bridge's night lamp it had the eerie quality of being underwater.

"Stand clear," the Captain ordered, leveling the pistol as best he could at the Bosun's chest.

"Um savin' yourr ship, Capt'n. There's nothin' wrrong with the Benwee." Bosun Frank did not appear to be afraid of dying. He did not seem to think that the Captain would pull the trigger on him.

Mr. Whitly had put his pistol in his pocket and was trying to get the Second Mate to sit up against the bulkhead.

"Leave him be," Bosun Frank said.

"You've hurt him," Mr. Whitly cried as the Captain pulled the trigger. The explosion was deafening in the small bridge. When the smoke from the muzzle cleared a little it seemed that Bosun Frank was unscathed. The Captain had purposely missed him as a warning. Bosun Frank did not quit the helm.

"That's yourr firrst mistake Capt'n," Bosun Frank said through his teeth. "If that's a Browning, ya've got eight morre ta go."

"You're fucking right about that," the Captain shouted. "Now what have you done to my Second Mate?"

"'e's a lucky one, 'e is. I should a snapped his neck forr 'im."

Captain Trillick calmed himself. "How's that?" he asked.

Stalls opened his eyes wide at the sight of the figure standing outside at the other end of the bridge. No one else saw the First Mate looking in.

"'e 'ad Sparks send a message. Beforre I knocked 'im, 'e laughed an' said we werre in the 'ands of frree Irishmen. 'e said that so I knocked 'im."

"I don't believe it," Mr. Whitly said, rising to his feet again, the pistol in his hand. "Not Mr. Gardner."

"You must mean the First Mate, Mr. Kerr," the Captain said.

"I wouldn't know that," Bosun Frank said matter-of-fact.

Stalls couldn't find any words to speak as he saw Mr. Kerr look quickly behind him and then make to open the door.

With a blast of freezing rain and wind Mr. Kerr opened and closed the door to the bridge. He stood, pistol in hand, with his back to the door, the color drained from his face.

Nobody spoke. No one stood still with the crazy rolling of the Benwee except Bosun Frank who vigilantly steered the ship with skill and strength and without fear.

Mr. Kerr cleared his throat. His eyes searched them and when they touched Stalls' he felt the man look through him as though he weren't even there.

"Capt'n," Mr. Kerr said.

"You," the Captain said.

"I'm not the man you suppose." Mr. Kerr's voice sounded tired.

"You." Captain Trillick waggled the end of his Browning. "You are behind all this."

"No."

"You, Mr. Gardner here, and Bosun Frank," and Captain Trillick's voice rose with excitement. He wasn't quite sure of anything anymore. "Where's that woman?" he shouted suddenly. "Where is Miss Carson?"

"She's dead. Overboard. She's the one that shot Mistairr McMahon." Mr. Kerr didn't say that he didn't know why.

"Mr. Corbin?" the Captain asked, "Mr. Corbin, are you there. Cover Bosun Frank."

"Hah!" said Bosun Frank as though the Captain had made a joke.

"Yes," said Stalls but no one heard him because somehow he found himself standing outside on the open bridge, bone cold, and wet, as though he had never followed Mr. Whitly and the Captain inside. He pressed his face to the thick storm glass of the door in time to see the helmsman, who had been in the chartroom all along, step into the bridge.

Mr. Kerr opened his mouth to speak. The helmsman, who had been the Bosun's reason for confidence, pulled the trigger on his big revolver and it spit fire and smoke. An ugly blossom of blood appeared over Mr. Kerr's heart. He closed his mouth and dropped his pistol.

In his confusion Mr. Whitly attempted to shoot the helmsman but shot Captain Trillick by mistake who was busily shooting both Bosun Frank and Mr. Gardner who managed to get to his feet in time to be shot. The resounding crash of

the confined gunfire swelled the room to its limits, awash in sound and blood. Mr. Whitly fell to a bullet from the helmsman's revolver. Bosun Frank, a fantastic grimace of surprise on his face, relinquished the wheel and staggered to the starboard with the roll of the Benwee. He fell into the arms of Mr. Kerr. The others joined them in a jumbled mass of arms and legs and spent pistols as the ship's bow slid into a trough of a monstrous wave and with immutable indifference to human tragedy listed and broached. I'm lost, Stalls thought as the ship rolled and he no longer stood on the deck but lay on the floor looking down into the bridge full of death. The sudden crash of the wave took them.

Before him stands the black cat, its front paws prancing and yellow eyes triumphant in their certainty. In the composite fear of both dream and reality he does not know what to say to the cat. The breeze lifts the old blue drapes patterned with white tulips and warm dry air from the desert fills the house.

The cat pricks its ears and moves its head slightly to see around his legs. It moves as the screen door behind him opens and bangs against the house.

"I'm home," she says, and walks around him to the kitchen, her arms filled with two bags of groceries. "Where have you been?" she asks over her shoulder as she begins to put the food away in the refrigerator.

He is so happy to see her that his throat aches. She has been out shopping all along. He doesn't know how to tell her where he had been. She's back, he's alive.

"Hey cat," he says and he can hear the cat purring as it weaves between her legs as she stoops to put the milk away.

"What did you say?" she asks.

"I'll get the rest of the groceries," he tells her and leaps to the screen door and slams it open.

There is no time for her to tell him that she has already brought them all inside.

TELL MY WIFE TO REMARRY

It had been three years since Bailey's mother-in-law packed her bags and left without so much as a see you later.

"She gave me the vilest eye I ever saw from a woman," his father-in-law would say later, his spirit somewhat bolstered by a double shot of Old Grand Dad, bonded. Before the drinking began he had called Bailey and calmly asked him to stop the mad woman at the bus station.

As usual Bailey responded. It was part of his job as the man being groomed to take over Del Rio Boot Company. Bailey's wife was sole heir and completely nonplussed by the notion of making great sums of money from the manufacture of western boots. So in terms of management Bailey stood stolidly next-in-line since every time the old man asked him if he liked boots he said yes.

Bailey had soaked through his shirt by the time he got down to the bus station. August in El Paso could be fun if you enjoyed sweating a lot. The air-conditioner overheated the engine in anything above 90⁰ F. Once he'd made the mistake of complaining to the old man about it.

"Take it to the shop," and after a penetrating gaze, "that's what mechanics are for. We make the boots, they fix the cars. So don't fuck up the balance."

For no logical reason Bailey never took it to the shop. He doomed himself to spending hot afternoons in his car with the windows down, free hand funneling in air. He also began carrying along an extra shirt in his briefcase.

The last person to see his mother-in-law was a middle-aged Mexican woman waiting for her sister. A stale finality permeated the bus station air. The smell of old fried food and sweat mixed with dust depressed him. His shoulder had begun to ache and would continue off-and-on for three more years until his collapse. None of this bothered the woman. She had her own life. The dark skin of her arms gleamed with an even film of perspiration.

"Yes, of course, sir. I have seen the woman. Tall with gray hair and a very nice aqua suit." The squawk-box overhead announced the arrival of a bus from Chihuahua.

"Mi hermana!" and the woman's eyes brightened with tears.

"Which bus did she take?" he asked as she turned to go.

"The rich lady?"

"Yes."

"She is very happy too. She told me she had left her husband, a terrible man, and I told her I hadn't seen my sister in fifteen years."

That's swell, Bailey thought.

"She said someone would be here asking." Behind her Bailey could see a bus pulling up to the station. The woman turned away. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I gave my word."

He thought he saw a glint of triumph in her dark eyes but it could have been the light off the jet black hair pulled tight over her head.

None of the ticket sellers, reluctant even with the times of departure, could remember his mother-in-law. Two buses had left in the last hour. One east, one west. He concluded that she must have bought the ticket earlier, which only meant, of course, that she had planned all this ahead of time. He had known his mother-in-law for ten years and thought he liked her. It had puzzled him to discover that he had trouble describing her.

Bailey's wife got a postcard from her mother a week later posted from Reno. It was a picture of a giant Saguaro cactus surrounded by all the animals of the Arizona desert. "Dear Keri," it read, "Please don't worry, I'm fine. Tell the bastard that it's all his now. Your loving Mother."

Keri didn't cry until that night in bed. She had never guessed there was trouble between them. She had thought they had the perfect relationship, the perfect marriage. Bailey tried to explain that's how a lot of people

felt about their parents but she just cried harder and said she didn't want to hear about other people. What did other people have to do with her? For once he was grateful being an orphan. His left hand had tingled with pins and needles all night from Keri's head resting on his arm.

A year later Bailey's father-in-law had begun to take little un-expected trips to Mexico and to the east and to the west. Sometimes he would be gone for two weeks. He would return looking a little older around the eyes, a few more lines, and hollow cheeked like he hadn't slept or eaten for days. He always left and returned by bus, carrying the same small leather suitcase with peeling corners.

Keri couldn't understand why her father had begun to take these little business trips when he had never taken them before. She hadn't told him about the postcards from her mother. But Bailey knew where the old man was going. He hadn't told him but Bailey knew. It had to do with the balance of things. His mother-in-law had upset the equilibrium and he just couldn't let her do it. Bailey didn't suggest private detectives, because, even though it was their job, he had a feeling that the old man didn't want to hear it. He didn't tell him about the postcards for the same reason. Not because Keri had asked him not to. It was not a happy time at work or home.

Ever since her mother had left Keri had begun to take long walks by herself after dinner and sometimes he would catch her staring at him with unfocused eyes, as though

he blocked her view of the draperies. Once she mentioned she had found his box of "dirty books" as she called it; all the pamphlets and small books of the Independent Workers Union of the World, *Quotations From Premier Chou En-Lai*, *Venceremos*, a People's Republic of China printing of the little red book, *Das Kapital*, and, oddly enough, even a copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* which he could never remember reading. Much to his chagrin he told her that it was all trash, that he had meant to throw it out but it had slipped his mind. He could see that she didn't believe him. He felt prepared to say anything to make her believe that he didn't believe what all those insidious books suggested one believe. But then there wasn't any good reason to convince her otherwise because she had said for a long time that she didn't marry him for the tattoo he had on his left arm. She did say that no child of her's would ever mutilate it's body with a tattoo. Now she never mentioned children.

The same arm with the tattoo continued to ache with regular familiarity. An old friend. Sometimes it would even be hard for him to get his breath but still he didn't go in for a checkup.

Then, one day, the balance of things came back together, or "a la contrair," as Keri liked to say when they argued, the disintegration of things, because afterall to Bailey they had become one in the same.

The day was hotter than normal at 110^o F and dreadful. A dust storm on its way, gritty and red, smudged the sky

to the north beyond the Franklin Mountains. It was the day before his father-in-law disappeared for the last time and Bailey talked with him after the board meeting. The eight other board members had filed out solemnly with the muted shuffling of papers and fresh cigar smoke in the air, the business under control. His father-in-law asked him to stay as he paused at the door to fish out his mother-of-pearl lighter.

"Sit down, please," the old man said, flapping his hand at no chair in particular. He was an open-minded old man.

"Certainly, Mr. Caldwell," and they looked at each other before Bailey sat. For the thirteen years that they had known and worked together Bailey had never called Terrence Powell Caldwell, sole owner and president of Del Rio Boot Company, anything but Mr. Caldwell while everyone in El Paso, even his daughter, called him Pow. Pow had never asked Bailey to call him Pow and Bailey had never offered. After a moment Pow turned to the huge plate glass window and stared out at the lights of El Paso beginning to flicker on in the red-tinged dusk. It was so quiet in the room that Bailey could hear the air whispering through the nose of the old man as he exhaled. Behind him the huge green Holiday Inn sign began to glow in the twilight.

Bailey waited for him to speak. There had been an argument during the meeting over the handling of a couple of union organizers. Bailey had contended that "cracking their

heads" was inappropriate. Everyone else thought it perfectly appropriate except for the old man, who said nothing, his pale blue eyes fixed on the curling wisps of smoke from all the cigars. Bailey did not volunteer the information that one of the organizers, Alejandro Diaz, was his best friend from high school. Nor, did Bailey know for that matter, that the old man knew this. Nothing had been resolved. No funds were set aside for hiring head crackers, and the meeting muttered to an end with the vice-president, Parker, creasing his stomach with the table and prodding the air with the butt of his cigar:

"Now just don't go forgettin' that this is *Texas*, Bailey."

The old man had adjourned the meeting as usual after that by clearing his throat and in a voice full of resonance, "Next week gentlemen."

Still the old man said nothing. He stood unmoving, his back rigid and shoulders tense. It made Bailey uneasy. The familiar dull ache crept into his left shoulder. He had been expecting it. He stubbed out the cigar. The old man turned and watched Bailey massage his arm under his suit coat. It felt very hot in the room and Bailey began to sweat. He thought it was because of the way the old man stared at him. I'm just sweating a lot, he told himself.

"I have come to a decision," and Pow raised his hand as Bailey opened his mouth, "but first we must settle a couple of things between us."

The air felt stifling and Bailey waved some of the smoke away from his face. The old man's eyes were like two cold bits of blue set in his weathered west Texas face. The old man was more serious than he had ever seen him.

"Well," and Bailey cleared his throat, feeling a numbness creep into his left hand, "Mr. Caldwell, I don't . . ."

"For starters!" the old man bellowed, his voice filling the large empty room, "call me by my name. Call me *Pow!*"

If Bailey hadn't been so disconcerted by the sudden aggressive tone of the old man he might have thought it funny; and if he hadn't been sweating so much. A peculiar hissing had started up in his ears, the sound of a stream at high flood eroding away its banks. The feeling made him queasy. He cleared his throat again.

"Well?" The old man's eyebrows, twin steel-gray wire brushes, arched over his eyes.

"Pow."

"Yes."

"Pow, I don't . . ."

The old man evidently thought this great fun. "You don't *what?*"

Bailey was beginning to think it obvious, the sweat had beaded up on his forehead. He mopped at it with his handkerchief.

"The heat getting to you?" the old man observed.

Bailey shook his head but he had already turned to the wall and fiddled with the thermostat. A distant hum of a

huge fan started and frigid air surged into the room. This didn't help Bailey at all.

The old man resumed his position in front of the window. "Now, about this Alejandro Diaz. You know him." It was not a question.

"Well, Mr. . . . I mean Pow, I *knew* him." Bailey felt that he spoke too quickly, as though he weren't telling the truth. He hadn't expected the old man to know.

"Good." Knew was as good as know to Pow. "If you knew him then you know him, and you'll get to know him again and better this time because I want you to settle this labor problem."

"It's not a small issue," Bailey complained and was glad that the old man didn't know it all. The cold wind from overhead seemed to be freezing him from the inside out. "The right-to-work law and all that."

"That's exactly it," Pow said from a long way off. "Every man's right, and since I'm turning this business over to you, you must convince this Mr. Diaz of this right, if you follow me."

Bailey wasn't sure he had understood. Turn over what business? The ache in his shoulder renewed itself with vigor. He had read somewhere that some people said it felt like a giant vise. He felt light-headed with terror and for some reason he wanted to laugh. But this was no laughing matter anymore.

"You see, I'm leaving the country tomorrow," Pow said to the window, his back to Bailey again. "I'm chucking it in. It's all yours," and he spread his arms to embrace the Holiday Inn sign swimming in the distance. The twilight had been swallowed up by night. The airconditioning shut off with a muffled click and silence crouched in the room and waited. All he could hear was his own wheezing and the high flood cresting somewhere in his head. Not a vise, he thought, more like a D-8 cat squatting on my chest.

"Her name is Felicia," and after a moment, "she's twenty-two," he admitted. Bailey thought that the edge had left the old man's voice. Its whole tone had changed, softened, as though now he wanted Bailey's acceptance.

Again it was silent. Bailey thought he might be having trouble breathing. He didn't know what to say. Perhaps he should ask the old man for help.

The moment passed.

"Best decision I've made in a decade," Pow told his vague reflection in the plate glass. He paused. "One last thing, though," and he turned back to Bailey, "I would like to know why you got that god-damned tattoo."

It was the last little push Bailey needed. He gave up the brave front, the "nothing's wrong with me attitude," and leaning on the table cradled his head in his arms. All those days, those years, those contortions he had gone through so his father-in-law would never see the tattoo. Never showering at the country club, wearing T-shirts around

the swimming pool because of his "skin condition" and Keri always shaking her head at his phobia, telling him to get it removed if it bothered him that much. While he felt she was right he also felt she never really understood. And now, apparently, the old man had known all along. Where could he start? How would he begin to tell the old man that he was someone else besides whom he seemed, the loyal hard working son-in-law. But then the old man was full of surprises himself.

So, with the blood singing in his ears, and someone doing a tap dance on his chest, Bailey, good-enough-to-leave-the-business-to, began to tell Pow about the tattoo.

It happened one night a year before I met Keri. The two of us, Alejandro and I, yes the Alejandro that is causing all the trouble, sat in the Kentucky Club over in Juarez, drinking tequila and cans of Tecate beer with salt and limes. For an hour Alejandro had talked about getting a tattoo.

Pow came away from the window and stood over Bailey. "What's wrong, son. Are you sick?" and he laid his hand on Bailey's shoulder.

Alejandro laughed.

"Are you afraid?" he asked me, as he sucked at the lime in his hand and raised his eyebrows over bloodshot eyes.

"No, I'm not afraid," I answered, aware that it was one of those acts in life from which there is no turning back. The sun had gone down and more people were out walking past

on the street. I wiped the sweat off my upper lip. A boy stood at the entrance holding a bundle of red carnations. He shook them at me as though I were to blame for them being in his possession. It made me angry.

Pow's hand tightened. "Bailey son. Are you all right?" He didn't think Bailey would take it so hard.

So Alejandro said, "All right, let's go."

We drove toward the bridge over the Rio Grande in his red and white Impala. Bright colored signs of bars and liquor stores floated by, a blurred rainbow in the night. And faces, lots of faces. Full faces with ruby red lips, profiles, quarter turned, and backs of heads. I remember all those people milling past the lights of Juarez, laughing and having a good time. It made me feel crazy inside. I rolled down the window and stuck my head out. The air was warm and smelled of rotting fruit and wet pavement, as though it had been raining. But I couldn't remember if it had. Thunder rumbled and another flash of lightning struck the mountains. Traffic backed up from the check point on the Texas side and Alejandro had to pull up at the end of the line a block from the bridge.

Pow realized something was very wrong with Bailey, who wouldn't answer, but continued to mumble and gasp head down on the conference table. Pow reached for the phone.

Alejandro asked if I had ever had any mezcal and I said I didn't know. He said it was a little like gold tequila but gave you a strange sort of high. They put a worm in each

bottle. He shifted the car into neutral. The line was not moving. He got out and walked back to a liquor store to get a bottle. We passed the mezcal back and forth as we inched, bumper to bumper, over the bridge into Texas. The mezcal tasted and smelled alot like kerosine but there was something soothing and pleasant about it, like I might lose touch with the seat and bob up against the faded headlining of the car's roof. I could feel myself giving way inside, the way a crack forms in an earth dam and water trickles out and not satisfied with just a trickle the great rumbling mass of water behind turns the crack into a chasm.

"There's a good place in El Paso called Johnny's," Alejandro said as the border gaurd punched the license plate into his computer.

"It's all right, they're on their way," and Pow didn't move him from the table but began to feel with his fingers at the side of Bailey's throat. It seemed odd to find such a strong beat. Bailey was so hot Pow thought he could see steam rising from his head. The wool cloth of his blazer was a shade darker from sweat.

Alejandro asked if he had ever told me about his cousin's tattoo and I said no. It was like a family tree. He had his wife's name tattooed on his chest when they got married and everytime they had a baby he would have its name put on below; and when one was born dead they gave it a name and he put that one on too, with a little black wreath around it.

At Johnny's TATTOO we got out and stood under the eve,

peering through the plate glass with the sound of rain and cars hissing past behind us. Inside a tall, red-haired woman methodically mopped the floor. She wore bell bottomed cords and a halter top. She had large breasts and they swayed back and forth as she mopped. Alejandro made a sucking sound with his mouth. She looked up, brushing her hair from her face. I thought she heard him, but she looked past us like we weren't there. She bent back to her mopping.

The walls were covered with hundreds of tattoos drawn on poster-board mounted behind acetate. The powerful smell of Mr. Clean and ammonia permeated the air. We stood in front of an eight inch parrot with turquoise, red, dark blue, yellow and black tail feathers. I felt hot. Sweat trickled down my back. The parrot cost one hundred fifty dollars. Alejandro let out a low whistle.

"You sure," he whispered from the corner of his mouth.

The woman pretended not to hear, continuing to mop in the far corner. I said yes, and looked at the bright colors, the eerie dull silver reflection of the florescent lights off the rippled surface of the acetate. Tattoos were everywhere. There was a springing coal-black panther with blood dripping from his fangs, devils, cupids, Bugs Bunny, heart after crimson heart, eagles with open beaks and great clasping talons, cobras with flaring hoods, and a hideous gaping mouth with a swollen tongue lolling over the lower lip. The woman stopped mopping as Johnny strode through the door with a box of Kleenex under his arm.

Pow wrestled Bailey out of his chair onto the table and straddled him. He wasn't sure if Bailey was really having a heart attack but he decided not to take any chances. Bailey's eyes were wide open and it reminded Pow of the wild eyes of a panicked horse. It chilled him to the bone. He'd seen plenty of newsclips on CPR instruction on the the television so he didn't feel completely ignorant, but they never said anything about these eyes.

"Johnny," Bailey said and flapped his arms on the table.

Pow didn't know who this Johnny was. He felt for Bailey's heartbeat again.

His expression was serious, almost glowering and he had long dark hair combed back from his forehead to his shoulders and a fu-man-chu mustache. He wore a tie-dyed skivvy that blended with the tattoos that completely covered his arms and shoulders. The woman pushed the bucket into a corner with the mop. Johnny stepped over the waist-high wooden barrier separating the waiting room from his studio. He disappeared through a green velvet curtain. "Anne!" and the woman followed him. After a moment she poked her head out from behind the curtain.

"Who's first?" she asked. Alejandro pointed to me.

Anne stared at us with a quisical expression, her lips pursed and eyebrows arched over green eyes.

"I am," I said and wiped my sweating palms on my jeans.

"Which one?"

I looked over all the tattoos again, on-the-spot as

Anne watched. I felt angry because Alejandro had led me on. It was then that I saw it for the first time, half-hidden by a shimmering bend of acetate. The tattoo was at waist level in the corner where Anne had pushed the mop and bucket. I recognized the even, black shadow drawing of Che Guevara, the wild confusion of hair and beard bordering the placid revolutionary face, the black upcast eyes and the same black beret fixed with a single five pointed star. Odd, but I felt it was something I had wanted for a long time, something that I needed. Yet, even now, I am not sure of my reasons.

"Which one?" Anne repeated.

"That one," I answered, pointing at Che. Anne opened the gate and walked over to stand beside me. Her perfume was sweet and it mixed in an odd way with Mr. Clean. She followed my finger to the wall with her eyes and leaned forward to peer at the drawing. I noticed the tendrils of colorful jungle ivy reaching out of her pants across the plane of her back.

"All right," she said in a flat voice and went back through the green curtain.

Alejandro asked which one I was getting and I told him to go fuck himself. But he was insistent, he wanted to make me point it out again. And like you old man he asked why.

Johnny sat on a stool spreading out his paraphernalia on a counter. The studio wasn't much bigger than a closet and smelled of animals and denatured alcohol, like a vet-

ernarian's office.

"Where would you like it?" Johnny spread some lotion on his hand.

I pulled up my sleeve and pointed to a spot on my upper arm. It was as though I had planned it out for a long time. Johnny spread the lotion and shaved the spot with a straight razor. He sprayed it with alcohol, spread some different lotion on, wiped off the excess and pressed a thin sheet of clear plastic with the outline of Che against my arm. It was a clean transfer.

Pow could not make up his mind what to do. He still felt the strong pulse at Bailey's neck and he continued to mumble and mouth words. He decided to wait a few moments longer before starting CPR. It occurred to him that Bailey might be an epileptic but he couldn't remember anyone ever mentioning it before. He picked up the phone and called Keri. She was at home. No, she said he was not an epileptic. Yes, she would be there in five minutes. Pow felt bad as he replaced the phone because she sounded frightened. For some reason he had expected her to be very calm and distant. A vague siren sounded from somewhere downtown. He hoped it was the ambulance. He would wait until the heart stopped.

Johnny told him to relax and poured some black ink out of a bottle into a cap. He picked up the tattooing needle that looked like an electric engraver. It had no cover over the motor and when he flipped on the switch it made an angry buzzing sound and spit little blue flames from its brushes.

Johnny dipped the needle into the capful of ink and let it suck some up. Calmly he turned to me and pulling the skin tight with his free hand he touched me with the jabbing point of the needle. It burned and Johnny sopped up the blood with a kleenex.

Later, after all that reading, book after book, pamphlet after pamphlet, I met Keri and fell in love head over heels. She told me she hated boots and I showed her my tattoo. It all seemed so romantic until I went to work for you, old man, and then I hoped you would never know. Not just the tattoo, but that I have been meeting with the laborers for a year now at Alejandro's house. Maybe you know that too.

It gets all mixed up so that I'm not sure if it's the tattoo at all but that maybe I married Keri so I wouldn't have to work in a factory like Alejandro. Now I wonder who betrayed who. Or perhaps, if it had worked, I would be him and he would be me; and like Che in Bolivia I could say that:

tonight I feel old. It was bad that the jeep was found. The radio is very important now. I am not to blame for the jeep but . . . he stopped writing and looked up. The candlewick sputtered and sent up a puff of soot across the woman's face. She had crept up to him very quietly after the rest had fallen asleep. A smile turned up the corners of her mouth and made her cheeks gleam in the yellow light. She licked her thumb and index finger and he watched her reach out slowly to the candle. The odor of hot wax came to him while through the air

of the moonless jungle night he heard her breathing.

He wrote: now is the time of the furnaces and only light should be seen. These were the words of a dead man, a dead poet. He couldn't remember when they had decided to split into two groups. A long time ago it seemed. It had been a mistake. He took up his pencil again: tonight we heard over the radio that the others have been killed less than ten kilometers from here. We heard nothing. She was killed too . . . there was a noise, and in one movement he snuffed out the candle and picked up his carbine. Nothing. Then the disconsolate whisper of wind came up the canyon again. He thought of the sound of her voice, husky and low in his ear, and the smoothness of her neck. I am sorry they found the jeep, she had said, it was my mistake. He recalled the gravel that dug into his elbows and her warmth as they struggled, silently crushing the grass beneath them.

He signaled for them to stop and they sat uneasily on their haunches, listening to the buzz of an airplane they could not see. Willy and he climbed up the side of the ravine to get a better view. His asthma was getting worse. They didn't need the binoculars. From the top of the ridge they could see the spotter plane flying lazy circles over the canyon next to theirs. When he caught his breath he decided they should move on. They needed to find water.

He wrote: another day of defeat. An intense feeling of satisfaction spread through him. He went over the word again with his pencil and made it very dark so that it stood out from the rest of the writing on the page. For the first time in weeks he felt good. Out of the ashes the Phoenix will rise, he said very carefully, very quietly to himself. Defeat took on a special meaning for him. That night he

dreamed of a leper, a frightened disfigured man who wanted very much to live.

The day before, from an old woman grazing her goats, they had learned the name of their rocky, almost barren canyon. It was the Quebrada del Yuro. She was reluctant to speak with them and kept her eyes on her skinny animals. She refused to sell them one. He wouldn't let them take one by force and they argued with him bitterly. He asked her where she lived and she pointed a vague finger down the canyon. In his heart he felt sad. This was not the way it should have been. He gave her fifty bolivianos and told her not to say a word about him to anyone. But she would.

They spent the night at the edge of a small potato field irrigated by a trickle of water. In the fading blaze of afternoon, he had led them cautiously around the bend of the ravine and stood over the green plants creeping across the burnt umber of the earth. Squash, someone said, and No son, he said, those are potatoes. And they remained standing in a tight group as the shadow of the ridge slanted across the field, across the silver reflections of several dying puddles of water. In the mud were the neat marks of cloven hooves and the pellets of the animal's spore. They did not hesitate to drink the pungent water and they did not hesitate to dig in the rocky ground with their fingers. They sat on their haunches in the dark and ate the potatoes raw because they could not risk a fire. He lit no candle that night and he wrote nothing in his book. He wished they could move on but they were already carrying one on a stretcher and there was the other whose eyes were bad.

The next day the sun rose hot and unrelenting. They drank more

carefully this time, straining the water through their teeth. The morning air was cold in the shade and he cursed the pain in his bones until noon.

He cursed again sometime after one o'clock when the first shots of the ambush caught them in the open. They took cover in the rocks and answered the fire. The shooting stopped and it was silent. From the distance came the chop of a helicopter. He had thought it would be too high for them. He lay back, squinted up at the blue cloudless sky, and thought that this place was as good as any.

The shooting began again and picked up momentum, and as the day moved toward night, he thought of what he might say:

whereas, the provisional government of Bolivia has no friends

These were not the same soldiers they had ambushed seven months earlier. These were the Rangers. Now and then he could see the blurr of fresh green cloth and the black plastic stocks of M-16s made by Americans to kill other Americans. He took time to aim. He thought:

whereas, the provisional government of Bolivia has no armed force, no armed leader

He yelled out for his men to make their way uphill, thinking that if they could reach the top they would have a chance. None of them wanted to die at the bottom of the ravine. None of them had wanted to die anywhere, not even him. He thought:

whereas, these are the hands of a heroic guerrilla, the tired untiring hands of a revolutionary, the fingers that have felt the taught muscles of his wife's womb

He lay on the side of the hill convulsively swallowing the dust and burned powder. The indifferent bullets snapped overhead at the

periphery of his vision. Willy had watched him pitch forward and heard the short angry scream smothered in the dirt. Willy had thought him dead until he rolled over, clutching at his knee; and then Willy had come back to help. Go to hell you fucking Bolivian! he shouted, his hands pushing bloody tracks across the other's chest. But Willy caught him under the arms and dragged him straight up to the top of the ridge. He thought:

whereas, no man deserves to be remembered and no man deserves to die alone

There were a few trees at the top and they took cover by one. He pulled himself up and clung to the shadowed trunk, protected from the white glare of the sun. Most of them have made it Commandant, Willy said, shielding his eyes. He said:

therefore, let them call me an adventurer, a twentieth century condottiere, let them call me a dirty son-of-a-bitch

The pain in his leg and the stink of burned powder became too much and propped against the tree he fell into a coughing fit. Something snatched his carbine violently from his hands and it spun away, rattling across the ground. He looked up into the wild faces of four soldiers with their weapons aimed at him, with fresh creases in their sleeves and pantlegs, with no dirt or dust on them as though they had fought the entire afternoon without leaving their feet. Willy stood beside him, holding his rifle by its sling. He dropped it to the ground.

The soldiers would take them both to La Figuera, a village three kilometers from the battlefield. They would

put them in a small two room schoolhouse. Willy in one room and him in the other. They would ask him questions but the answers would not matter even when they offered to crack his head for him. He wanted to know who was wailing and Pow squeezed his shoulder to reassure him. They were coming. A soldier would say he wanted to have his pipe and yes, he would say, you may have my pipe. Pow told him that Keri said she was on her way. Yes, he would say to them, we had executed any guerrilla leaders who invaded Cuba; and he would smile. The sound of voices would come from the next room and he would think he heard Willy's above the rest. The sound of a crowd would grow and assume a cadence down the hall. Keri stood at the door behind the men in white. A muffled shot would go off and he knew that they had executed Willy, if that was his real name. He feared no time would be left to speak. Keri opened her mouth and she stared at her father, questioning. The paramedics moved quickly and efficiently around him. He would wait calmly for the soldiers. No, they said, it was not a heart attack or even a myocardial infarction. A seizure they thought and gave him a sedative. He thought of Alejandro or was it Willy? as his eyelids grew heavy and hooded his eyes. A darkness moved across his vision the was the shadow of a towering thunderhead moves across a mountain. He thought, then, as the soldiers took aim, of all the things he could have done. What can I say, Sergeant Teran asked. Tell my wife to remarry, he would mouth into the cool air of the room as the burning in his chest turned to ashes.